

PRIMITIVISM WITHOUT APPROPRIATION BOAS, NEWMAN AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ART

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In September 1946, in a piece introducing an exhibition of North-West Coast Indian painting, Barnett Newman wrote:

It is becoming more and more apparent that to understand modern art, one must have an appreciation of the primitive arts, for just as modern art stands as an island of revolt in the stream of Western European aesthetics, the primitive art traditions stand apart as authentic aesthetic accomplishments that flourished without the benefit of European history.¹

Whilst postulating a very close link between his painting and primitive art, Newman here proposes an aesthetics whose primitivist reference is not restricted to direct appropriation of forms.

The great New York painter invokes the idea of a *ritualistic will*² to create, which he attributes to Amerindian artists (*The first man was an artist* is the title of a piece he wrote at that time), and at the same time engages in formal artistic research free of all imitation. He has no desire to borrow visual themes from primitive art but refers to it as if it were a parallel field of research. This attitude was not unique in 1940's New York. Newman shared it with other artists including Gottlieb, Still, Rothko and Kline.³ This approach, animated by a strong feeling of affinity with primitive artists ("to be an artist is to make, is to be just that", Newman seems to be saying in his presentation of Kwakiutl painting), is that of one of the great currents in twentieth century primitivism, one which Rubin and his fellow

researchers least explored.⁴ It is perhaps also the approach which is still alive today in the work of painters and sculptors like Beuys and Twombly. This feeling of solidarity, almost of brotherhood, that Newman has towards Amerindian artists challenges another distinction: that between the work of contemporary artists and anthropological research into the art of so-called primitive societies.

Elsewhere I have attempted to give a definition of the field of study of the anthropology of art, which whilst allowing us to understand the history of Western interpretation of primitive art, can be applied to *all* works of art.⁵ In this essay I should like to show how, from the same angle, one might formulate that link which exists between supposedly primitive art and certain contemporary research.

The Latin word 'ars' has had for centuries two distinct senses, which nowadays seem quite remote from one another. On the one hand — writes Panofsky (1987, first published 1943) — 'ars' designates the conscious and intentional capacity of man "to produce objects in the same manner as nature produces phenomena." In this sense "the activities of an architect, a painter or a sculptor could, even at the height of the Renaissance, be described as 'ars' in the same way as those of a weaver or a bee-keeper". On the other hand, the term 'ars' also designated — in a use of the word which has almost disappeared nowadays — a set of rules, or of techniques, that thought must

use in order to represent the real. Thus not only were the rules of logical argument an 'ars' for sophists and stoics, but also what we now call astronomy could, for centuries, describe itself as the "art des étoiles".

Taking as a starting point the double meaning of this concept, which has almost disappeared from our own tradition, we can say that the study of the link that each culture establishes between these two aspects of the notion of art — between certain forms of knowledge and certain techniques of conception and production of images — constitutes the object of anthropology of art. The task of the anthropologist is, then to compare, in each and any work of art, the functions of technique and thought.

In actual fact, in this meeting of Newman's artistic research and the work of Kwakiutl artists — an attitude of revolt against Western tradition facing the art-products of societies which have always been foreign to our own — the problematic notion is precisely that of technique.

According to Boas' earliest research — which is part of a tradition going back to Reigl⁶ and Semper⁷ — the products of the plastic arts of primitive societies acquired the status of works of art precisely because of a reflection on technique:

"The intuitive feeling for form must be present," writes Boas. "So far as our knowledge of the works of art of primitive people extends the feeling for form is inextricably bound up with technical experience."⁸

The criterion which guides him in his analyses of the art of the North-West coast is clear: art exists where the absolute mastery of a technique culminates in a *perfect form*. This form can then transcend the simple function of the utilitarian object and become the model for a style. This depends as much on the particular organization of a culture as on the constraints inherent in all representation of space. According to Boas, there are only two ways of representing space: one refers directly to vision and, imitating the eye, represents objects in a unifocal perspective. The other represents objects not as they present themselves to vision, but rather as they are represented by the mind. Hence a North-West coast sculptor can multiply perspectives and

represent an animal from several points of view simultaneously, or even combine the *disjecta membra* of a male dolphin and a female seal to show us the monstrous fruit of their metamorphosis.

Primitive art is then neither naive nor rudimentary: in fact in choosing a specific variation of mental organization of space, it constructs a complexity where our eyes are used to simplifying. When we look at a picture drawn in an illusionist perspective we expect a simplified representation of the object in order to *imagine* the complex totality of features which constitute it. Primitive art moves in the opposite direction: the tendency is towards a complex representation of the features of an object so that we can mentally construct its real presence: so that we can *imagine* it more completely than can the mere eye. This type of representation — when it reaches that state of perfection that Boas describes — generates such a tension between verisimilitude and the invisible that it produces the illusion of an unreal space: the coordinates that determine this space are not those of vision.

We have seen that the discovery of this concept of space in Kwakiutl art was for Boas the result of a reflection on technical experience. If we turn our attention to the texts written by the artists of the New York School, this notion seems to have disappeared from the very definition of art: "Art is defined not by its technique of production, manual or other, but by the inner shape of the society in which it appears," wrote Harold Rosenberg in a 1971 piece devoted to the work of Marcel Duchamp.⁹ Here as elsewhere in Rosenberg's writing, the attempt to understand the artist's thought comes up against a reflection on the public (indeed political) nature of art. "Today, art itself is the critic", he wrote in a more recent piece: to conceive and interpret forms is to question the place of art (and, through art, *invention*) in society.

It is of course not by chance that these thoughts spring from a reflection on Duchamp. Amongst the great discoverers of the century, Duchamp has, perhaps, most clearly shown that before even being a form for the eye to behold, the work of art is an *act*, and that no form can be understood without analysing the sequence of acts through which the artist

realises mental space, amongst which the work of art is merely the end product or a fragment; Rosenberg points this out in connection with Mondrian in *Art on the Edge* (1983).

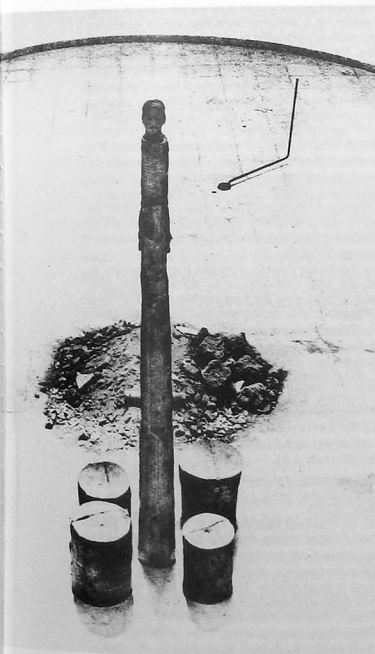
The ordering of this sequence should in no way be confused with technical procedure. This word, Rosenberg seems to think, is too full of traps. It should be carefully redefined when applied to modern art:

In the changed relation between art and history, the automations involved in the application of craft skills have been replaced by acts of the mind occurring at the very beginning of the making of a work. . . . Their effect is to remove art from the realm of habit, manual dexterity, and traditional taste into that of philosophy.¹⁰

This view, which is perhaps excessively intellectualist, of the abstract painter's work should not make us forget that this preliminary sequence of acts by the artist "which occurs at the very beginning of the making of a work" and which defines the work's style and thought, is directed above all at the definition of a space. The work of a painter free from any primitivist tendency like the early De Chirico clearly illustrates this point. In his first paintings — which, after surrealism and via Duchamp, had a profound influence on the New York School — the intensity of the images never results from the objects that appear in the paintings nor, as has too often been claimed from their incongruous placement. The power of some of the *Places d'Italie* and some of the *Autoportraits* comes from the fact that the co-ordinates of the painted space are so unbearable to the eye that they end up showing us a physically impossible space: a space that the eye can never entirely grasp.

What is abolished in these scenes is the horizon against which the objects — and the beholder — are inscribed. If we look at various urban landscapes from the Ferrarese period, we can see that no town, no landscape, can have such a close horizon. The painter's dizzying foreshortening shows a point in space that cannot exist. Yet the space is there, silent. A train passes by behind the arcades, the shadow of a girl is glimpsed. She has a toy in her hand. The imagery seems oneiric, because the space in which it appears cannot exist in the world we know. This unreal cutting up of space is

JOSEPH BEUYS *Tram Stop 1*, 1976
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aimed, as De Chirico later wrote, at reflecting the very mechanism of thinking.¹¹

Before the avant-gardists the technical task of a painter (his craft skills, as Rosenberg put it) had as its *initial* goal the reproduction of a unique and verisimilar spatial model. For twentieth century painting, or at least for those painters who, like Mondrian, considered that "the surface of natural things is beautiful, but its imitation is dead matter",¹² the construction of a *physically impossible* space is the first act of the technical procedure. In this act of defining space, which precedes any occurrence of image, the contemporary artist identifies the *ars* of thought with the *ars* of technique. Opting for radical abstraction thus coincides with an imaginary exploration of the origins of pictorial representation. What the Kwakiutl artist demonstrates to Newman is the possibility of conceiving a space where the realm of thought can be made in age ("the I, terrible and constant, is in my eyes the subject of painting" he declared in 1985); a place where the abstract forms of geometry can definitely disengage themselves from all reference to the everyday experience of vision in order to become "a language of passion".¹³ From that point on, technical innovation becomes ever more closely identified with development of thought.

Today, through the work of other artists, the definition of space remains very close to this vision of primitive art. Let us look at a last sample: *Tram Stop*, which Beuys first showed in the 1976 Venice Biennale. In this sculpture, all the elements of the image (the tumulus of rubble, the four rounds of wood around the image of a man, the tram cable and the length of piping which sketch a perspective in a place which cannot but suggest the apse of a small chapel) aim at defining the space of an altar. The traditional coordinates of the place of ritual are, however, completely absent. Instead of an icon surrounded by offerings in the half-light of a chapel, we see the apparently randomly scattered traces of a private cult whose beliefs we shall never know. In this case, as in American Indian art, the work becomes the place where a tension between the realistic and the invisible is generated. For Newman as for Beuys, primitive art does not constitute a repertory of terms to imitate. Through the

aesthetic ideal in their work, the identification of the *ars* of technique and the *ars* of thought, primitive art at one and the same time offers them the model of a non-illusionist space and a series of techniques of mental representation. It is in the space defined by these techniques — techniques which no longer follow the eye, but the mind — that each form will henceforth seek its perfect state.

NOTES

1. H. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, New York, Abrams, 1978, p. 241.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Rosenberg explains Newman's attitude towards European painting of that time as follows: "Newman put forward the concept of an ideal art without visual references as a development for which American artists were particularly fit. Even in its most abstract modes, Newman contended, European art remained wedded to its 'sensual nature'; the geometrical forms of 'purists', such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, were actually equivalents of trees and horizons. Against the naturalism inherent in the European sensibility, a new group of American painters, Newman asserted, were creating a 'truly abstract world'. For those artists (Gottlieb, Rothko, Still and himself), he claimed an art entirely liberated from residues of things seen, a virtually clean state of the imagination. The American abstractionists were 'at home in the world of the pure idea', as the Europeans were at home among the objective correlatives of sensations." (op. cit., p. 37-38)

4. See Varnedoe's study 'Abstract Expressionism' in W. Rubin (ed), *Primitivism in XXth Century Art*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Of Modern Art, New York, 1986.

5. C. Severi, 'Anthropologie de L'Art', to be published in *Dictionnaire de L'Ethnologie et de L'Anthropologie*, Paris PUF.

6. A. Riegl, *Stilfragen*, Berlin, 1923 (2 ed.).

7. G. Sempér, 'London Lecture: November 11, 1853', in *Res-Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 6, 1983, and (London Lecture: December 1853), in *Res-Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9, 1985.

8. Should read p.11.

9. H. Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1983, p.4.

10. *Ibid.*, p.136.

11. On De Chirico's thought, see P. Fossati, *La Pittura Metafisica*, Turin, Einaudi, 1988, and G. De Chirico, *Il Meccanismo del Pensiero*, Turin, Einaudi, 1987.

12. "For the surface of things is beautiful, but its imitation is dead matter. Things give us everything, but their representation no longer gives us anything." (Mondrian, *Diaries 1914*, cit. in M. Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, Paris, Flammarion, 1956, p.116).

13. H. Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, op. cit., p.37.