NEITHER LEGIBLE NOR ABSTRACT

ARTURO HERRERA'S WORK UNDER THE SIGN OF AMBIGUITY

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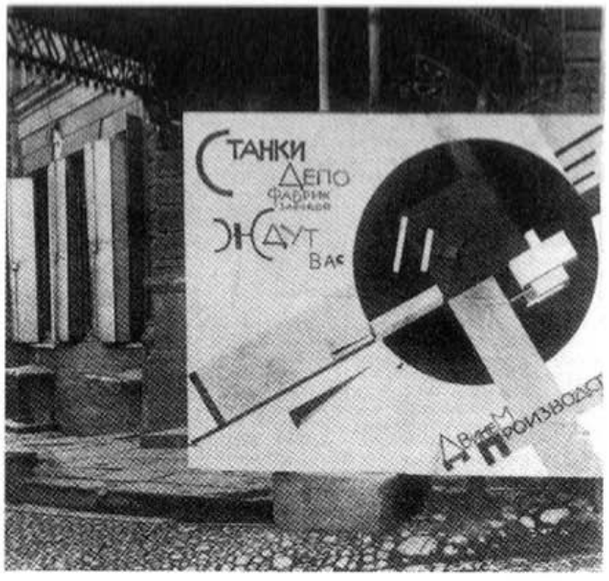
I

In bidding farewell to modernism, T.J. Clark looks back at a work installed in 1920 on a street in Vitebsk, the Russian (now Byelorussian) town where El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich worked at the People's Art School.[1] The work in question is a plafond in which Lissitzky combined suprematist shapes with an agit-prop message that called the people to the factories, assembly floors and workbenches in order to 'move production forward'. Somehow difficult to read because of the intense dynamics of the composition, the Cyrillic inscription nonetheless makes a lot of sense: it complies with the provoking, eye-catching techniques of agit-prop, the 'art of extreme situations',[2] to propagandise for the reconstitution of the industrial workforce in a country economically crippled by an ongoing civil war. What do not make sense – or could only make sense through the formation of a new language, the putative language of modernist abstraction – are the geometric shapes that provide a context for the work's message of political agitation. That is what makes Lissitzky's 'propaganda board' (fig. 1) so interesting, so appealing: in combining (or merging, one could say) abstraction and written inscription, Lissitzky raises the question of the meanings that might be read out of abstract form.



1 El Lissitzky,
Propaganda Board, 1920

The propaganda board betrays modern art's latent and never quite satisfied desire to derive sense out of the body of abstraction. As important, Lissitzky's question, that of abstract form's legibility, is resonant in a quite specific political sense. For more than addressing abstract art's capacity to constitute a legible code, the propaganda board asks whether it might serve as an instrument capable of moving – to paraphrase its closing motto – the production of a collective forward: could abstract form imbricate itself with historical processes, invoke a collective's attention, shape the production of an engaged public audience? As the conditions that made Lissitzky's early work possible gave way to circumstances that required, or enforced, other modes of social engagement, these questions would be answered in the negative. In the 'rejective' variety one tends to identify with high modernism – as opposed to the engaged, 'avant-garde' form that Lissitzky proposed – the practice of abstraction would circumscribe itself to the verification of its own topography.[3] It would congeal into an established formal system, one where 'history' could only be that of the pictorial medium's self-defining conventions.

Central to the formation of modernism and to those narratives that deal with twentieth-century art, such is the history that Arturo Herrera subverted in 2005, when he hired a craftsman to apply a band of fluctuating black paint to the lateral façade of a Berlin building. At first sight, and despite the curbed intrusion of organic references, *Untitled* (*Wall painting for Berlin)* (fig. 2) could be read as a latter-day re-enactment of modernism's self-involvement. The emphatic reinstatement of monochromatic painting links the work with an already firm tradition of testing the limits of flatness – that is, of the pictorial support – against the 'illusion' of space. The latter is conjured by having what appear like cut-out pieces of the wall float over the black coat of paint. In creating a tension between illusion and the concrete materiality of painting, the mural resorts to one of modernism's basic strategies. For it is that tension that would have enabled, according to the modernist tradition in question, a critical form of perception to be exercised – and to be exercised, quite importantly, in opposition to those mass-

2 Arturo Herrera, *Untitled (Wall painting for Berlin),* 2005, Zimmerstrasse 90/91

cultural products whose uncritical consumption prompts viewers to buy into a fabricated, illusory perception of social space.

It is, moreover, against the grain of social space that modernism's mode of critical perception ended up being practiced: the assumption that all forms of the collective were to be eventually gripped by either the manipulative force of the 'culture industry' or the decadent influence of kitsch – as two of the main validations of twentieth-century art's self-entrenchment would put it[4] – spurred modernism's tendency toward a form of privatised vision. The fact that Herrera's mural unfolds in public space is not enough for reverting that tendency. It could be read as one more form of modernist art's complacent adoption of a public context, an adoption facilitated in the twentieth century by modernism's loss of an effective oppositional power. Thus deprived, modernist works could be easily transposed to public spaces to which they would not, however, relate critically. Their function, more often than not, would be to serve as decorative prostheses of social experience. Yet to interpret Herrera's mural as a continuation of modernism's problematic legacy would be as mistaken as to assume that it simply rejects the critical core of the modernist project. This work, as with Herrera's work in general, is much more complex than that: the mural underscores its own contemporaneity through a critical association with its political and artistic past, thereby indicating that the possibility of an oppositional modernism might not be, after all, an entirely closed question.

Identified as Zimmerstrasse 90/91, the building inscribed with the artist's meandering trace had already been marked out by historical circumstances;

it forms part of the notorious *Zeitungsviertel,* the Berlin district where in May 1, 1927 Adolf Hitler addressed a mass audience for the first time. The historical fact that it is inside and in the immediacy of this building that mass events began to be organised by the National Socialist Party – and that it is therefore here where an urban collective began to congeal around Nazi discourse – complicates the work's self-reflective assertion of flatness. For if the modernist emphasis on the reciprocally defining relation between mark and surface could have responded to an interest in preserving painting's autonomy, here it functions, on the contrary, as a means of connecting abstraction with the historical event. Otherwise put: if the reassertion of pictorial 'flatness' could have been considered a means of limiting the practice of abstraction to conditions that could be verified, tested, materially supported (and not induced, enforced, imposed from the site of political or commercial power), here it is used to create a force field of tense relations between pictorial mark and the support of history – the history of an authoritarian discourse that suppressed abstract art's aspirations to discursive autonomy as a 'degenerate' pursuit.

II

Both as a problem and as a renewed possibility, abstraction had been part of Herrera's work since very early on, even when that work made ample use of representation. Consider the photograph of a forest (fig. 3) which the artist took in 1997. Since it condenses many of the problems that he would later develop, the image is assigned a paradigmatic status in the sugges-

tive interpretation that Neville Wakefield offers of Herrera's production: a meditation on light and darkness, blindness and insight, legibility and occlusion, the photograph circumscribes a liminal zone that, one could add, the artist would revisit through other means.[5] For Herrera seems bound to go back to what he calls 'ambiguity': a never solved tension between recognition, the identification of shapes and forms, and disorientation, the impossibility of making sense out of that which one perceives. Most importantly, ambiguity is used as a critical instrument to raise once again (though under conditions quite different from those of Lissitzky, of course) the problem of abstraction's legibility. Making critical incisions into the already extensive body of images industrially produced by Walt Disney, among other companies engaged in the reproduction of mass culture, Herrera composes a new body whose basic elements are fragmented, dislocated, estranged. It is then not against but through mass culture that the artist recreates the conditions that had made possible a critical form of abstraction. That point is as fundamental for an interpretation of the artist's proposal as is the following: what Herrera fragments, dislocates, and recomposes is not the image itself, but its legibility. It is the illustration's capacity to be readily recognised, consumed by a collective audience that drives the artist's appropriation of serially produced images.

The procedure, therefore, entails more than the interests which the critical reception of Herrera's work has already identified. His fabrication of grotesque, yet at the same time enticing hybrids out of familiar cartoon images – the artist's creation, in other words, of a mass-cultural uncanny – aims not

only at reinvesting the presumed innocence of such figures with libidinal content. More than laying bare the unspoken desire which such images sublimate, the artist's techniques of fragmentation aspire at reconstructing another body – another desire, therefore – informed by modernism's utopian ambitions. Such an intention is expressed most clearly in Herrera's interview with Josiah McElheny. As they talk about fragments – the bits and pieces that the artist cuts out from all sorts of printed material, and to which he applies a formative, transformative, even reformative logic in order to build up a new structure, if not a new totality – Herrera stated his need to address "in which ways modernism failed or succeeded ... Modernism's boundless optimism and idealism", the artist declared, "created exciting visual realities. Some of these propositions failed ... but their achievements are still resonant and influential ... The key is to have a critical dialogue with this legacy."[6]

3 Arturo Herrera, *Untitled,* 1997, gelatin silver print, 41.5 x 51.5 cm

The interest in such a dialogue informs a great deal of contemporary art. The issue – what makes Herrera's work so unsettling – is the use of familiar, well-rehearsed modernist strategies such as fragmentation and recomposition in a manner that estranges modernism itself. The artist's use of collage, one could say, is both critical and redemptive: instead of merely opposing mass culture, as critical modernism, by definition, is supposed to have done, the artist tries to redeem from it the capacity to signify (in other words: the capacity of being meaningful for a public audience), which is what modernism gave up. Critically intervening mass-produced forms and then using them to ask about the public import – the legibility – of abstract form at large, Herrera seeks to revert the privatised form of vision that had come to define the degraded idea of modernist art, an idea to which one could all to easily bid farewell. The point is that he does so by making use of what could be considered a degraded form of collective integration. Mass-culture's capacity to articulate a collectively accessible set of meanings is thus redeemed in order to articulate it differently, otherwise. Therein lies one of the most provocative aspects of his work: the interest in redefining the canonical opposition between mass culture and modernism so as to reorganise, out of the fragments of the modernist project, a mode of discourse whose critical edge would lie in the strategic administration of its autonomy.[7]

III

In *Abstract Art Against Autonomy,* Mark A. Cheetham resorts to a metaphor that Kazimir Malevich, Lissitzky's early mentor, had used to explain the mechanics of painting's stylistic development.[8] Malevich proposed to ana-

lyse that development as a process of successive 'infections' that would invariably afflict all established pictorial systems – cubism, say, or suprematism – and motivate a series of reactions. According to Malevich, the infection in question would amount to the infiltration into a given stylistic body of an 'additional element', an intractable formal element that would trigger the organisation of an entirely new 'style'. Cheetham uses this metaphor to approach contemporary forms of abstraction in a manner whose pertinence escapes the purpose of these notes. It is tempting, however, to resort to Malevich's notion of 'infection' in order to reconnect with the work with which this text began. For one could argue that Lissitzky's propaganda board is afflicted by one such infection: the infiltration of writing into the board's suprematist system, and the destabilisation of the pictorial sign that, according to T.J. Clark, such an infiltration generates, would warrant the assertion that here it is the written sign that serves as an 'additional element'. That assumption's implications – the reorganisation of abstraction's body on the basis of discourse – would not have been, however, of Malevich's liking. Lissitzky's mentor would have favoured the contrary procedure: to have writing be infiltrated by abstraction; to have legible discourse be infected by the force of illegibility, of opacity.

Between the two options there opens up a polarized field, one that would determine many of modernism's strategic moves and one which Herrera has reorganised in a compelling way. Such a reorganisation, one should note, might also be inflected by a much more restricted, local tradition. The artist's Venezuelan origin must have sensitised him to the efforts of *cinetismo*[9] – one of his country's major forms of post-war modern art – to infiltrate public space and act there as an 'additional element', aimed at

fostering new modes of social experience. The recent work which Herrera produced for an exhibition at the daadgalerie, Berlin (pp. 26/27), and which coincided with the realisation of the mural discussed above, would seem to indicate the artist's renewed interest in that aspect of his own visual formation: the optical dematerialisation of the walls under the vibrating force of a series of red lines might be confused with a work, say, by Carlos Cruz-Diez. But Herrera also witnessed how the utopian ambitions of Venezuelan modernism were co-opted by other, more powerful forms of discourse, such as the technocratic interpretation of the country's process of modernisation. That interpretation would also tend to colonise desire – the desire, in this case, for modernity – and reproduce it in a massive scale. It is hard to foresee how the artist would go about recomposing the fragments which this particular modernist legacy left behind. But one could guess, given the body of work already done, that such a recomposition would recombine the thrust of desire and the power of enforced discourse so as to articulate from those two elements a new idiom, one divided between opacity and legibility, between autonomy and social engagement.

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NOTES

[1] See T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2] The phrase is taken from an essay by Anatoia Strigaijow: "Agitprop: die Kunst extremer politischer Situationen", *Berlin – Moskau, 1900–1950*, ed. by Irina Antonowa and Jörn Merkert (Munich and New York: Prestel, 1995).

[3] 'Rejective' is the adjective Lucy Lippard uses in relation to Ad Reinhardt's monochromatic painting. See Lippard, "The Silent Art", in Francis Colpitt (ed.), *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[4] The reference is to Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, respectively.

[5] Neville Wakefield, "Mix Not Match Not", *Arturo Herrera*, Renaissance Society at University of Chicago, 1998.

[6] Josiah McElheny, "Arturo Herrera", *Bomb. Interviews*, Dec. 15, 2005.

[7] On the notion of 'strategic autonomy', which Herrera seems both to assert and deny — hence my use of the term 'administration'— see Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 103.

[8] Mark A. Cheetham, *Abstract Art Against Autonomy. Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[9] The conflict of presenting movement in a static work of art has challenged painting from its beginnings. Resolving this contradiction became a source of utopian activity for a small yet groundbreaking group of Venezuelan artists called the Cinéticos. Beginning in the 1950s, these artists created motion through the displacement of the viewer, rather than trying to depict movement on the wall itself; the action of a person walking in or in front of an artwork produces vibrations on the retina that simulate movement.