

An Archaeology of Modernism

Gazes

Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men.
More than the other senses the eye objectifies and masters.
It sets at a distance, maintains the distance. In our culture,
the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing
has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations...
The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.¹

In a black and white photograph published in the magazine *Life* dated 22 May 1939, we see a group of persons standing in front of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* [Fig. 1], painted in Paris in 1907. The photograph was taken on 8 May 1939 at the exhibition "Art in Our Time" and those portrayed are members of the board of Trustees of the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), an institution destined to become the most powerful centre of modern or contemporary art² in the world albeit there are those who have wickedly insisted on calling it the "Kremlin of modern art". In the photograph six persons

¹ That is to say it becomes an image, added Owens 1983, 70, quoting Luce Irigaray (1978).

² The meaning of the terms modern art and contemporary art has still not been completely resolved. Although in many cases, languages and contexts nowadays Modern art refers to avant-garde art from the end of the 19th century to the Fifties and Sixties and Contemporary art to that produced from thereon, this use is neither unanimous nor constant. In this book, furthermore, we shall be using many written sources from the first decades of the 20th century that, naturally, use the expression contemporary art to refer to Cubism and other contemporaneous avant-garde movements. Since this book focuses on the theories of modern art, or the modern aesthetic, we shall use, preferably, the expression "modern art" but also interchangeable with that of "contemporary art". We are confident that the context will

appear to be listening to a seventh, situated in the centre and pointing with a smile at some imprecise detail in the painting. At first he is apparently pointing to one of the nudes, the young lady at centre left but perhaps it might be the one on the far left who appears to be entering some kind of scene. We cannot know what the gentleman is telling the group of people but in any case, his audience is returning his smile.

This photograph shows us a cordial meeting in which, possibly, someone is proposing an explanation of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to a small, select audience. In the foreground at the lower left corner of the photograph, it is just possible to discern, a slightly out-of-focus hand holding a camera, taking another photograph of the scene from a different angle. I would like to propose this image as a type of portrait to illustrate this book because I have written it from the position of the camera, to observe, to show and to examine the different explanations devoted to this work throughout its hundred years of existence. The smiling faces in the photograph can only be a good omen.

The person to whom they are listening is Nelson A. Rockefeller, the then president of the MoMA trustees. And let us look closer at his audience and the gazes of the three distinguished gentlemen and three distinguished ladies.³ Art history discipline consists above all in an exercise questioning the gaze. The gazes of the five women portrayed in the painting of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* have always aroused attention, mainly because they are directed outside the canvas, focusing on the spectator. Let us consider the gazes of the people in the photograph. The men appear to be gazing at the spot in the painting indicated by their speaker. But what about the women? Are they gazing at the same spot? Strangely enough they are not. The lady on the left is looking at the speaker, not at the canvas as is the lady on the far right. The lady next to Rockefeller has boldly turned her back on the painting: her vision is angled 180° away from the subjects of the painting and she is smiling indulgently at the crowd but not at the young naked women.

Now, let us ask ourselves what each of these persons sees when they gaze on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. John Golding (2001), one of the great specialists on Cubist painting, stated that it is one of the few paintings that can appear completely different to the same eyes of each gazer on different occasions. This book will deal with these differences and the various ways of seeing *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* that have existed since 1907. It will attempt to trace the history of the explanations or interpretations that have been offered of the work since it came into existence more than a hundred years ago. But before we delve into this history we should look at some basic historical data on the painting.

make the meaning clear in each case. The term Modernism is superimposed on these expressions and will be clarified in due time.

³ From left to right: Johan Hay Whitney, Mrs. W.T. Emmet, A. Conger Goodyear, the president of the board Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mrs. John Sheppard, Edsel Ford and Mrs. John Parkinson Jr., photographed by Herbert Gehr, and published in *Life* magazine on 22 May 1939, p. 82. *Life* magazine copyright Time Warner Inc.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, Some Basic Facts

Pablo Picasso planned and painted *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* on an almost square canvas measuring 244 by 234 centimetres during the final months of 1906 and the first half of 1907 in his Paris studio, in the mythical Bateau Lavoir in Montmartre. Max Jacob had coined the name because the building reminded him of the floating washhouses that could be seen anchored along the Seine river. Preceded by an enormous amount of sketches, it is generally agreed that the painting was retouched during its execution so that in the end only the two young ladies at centre left conserved their original aspect while the two on the right and the one entering at left were repainted over the originals. From the moment of its rendering the work was moved to a succession of the painter's studios and was not exhibited to the public until 1916. Thus, for almost a decade it was only seen by Picasso's group of intimate friends, including Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob and André Salmon and other close friends, painters, enthusiasts and avant-garde collectors. There were also occasional visits from people like the American critic Gelett Burgess who saw it in 1908 and reproduced it for the first time with the cursorily descriptive title of *Studio by Picasso*, in the article "Wild Men of Paris", published in May 1910 in the *Architectural Record* magazine. This would become an influential essay for the introduction of modern art into the United States. One of the first authors, other than Burgess, to mention the work was the poet and essayist André Salmon in *Histoire anecdotique du cubisme* in 1912. Both he and later, Daniel H. Kahnweiler, the art dealer for the Cubist works of Picasso and Braque in 1920, considered it to be the departure point of Cubism.

In July 1916 the painting was shown to the public for the first time in the Salon d'Antin, the couturier Paul Poiret's private gallery, close to his atelier in the Faubourg Saint Honoré in an exhibition of modern art organised by André Simon. And it was here that it was given its final title, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* to avoid the inherently suggestive names it had been previously given by Picasso and his intimate friends, all of which made more or less explicit reference to a brothel scene and were hardly suitable as a title for that place and time. In 1924 another fashion designer, the patron and art collector Jacques Doucet, purchased the painting on the recommendation of the writer and "father" of surrealism, André Breton who printed it in issue 4 of *La Révolution surréaliste* in July 1925. On Doucet's death, his widow sold it to the Seligmann Gallery who in turn would pass it on in 1939 to the New York Museum of Modern Art, its final resting place and where we have the opportunity of seeing it.

We should mention here that Paris in 1907 had become the capital of avant-garde art, thanks, in the first place, to Impressionism and later, movements that art critics called Postimpressionism (Gauguin, Cézanne, Van Gogh etc.) and Fauvism (Derain, Braque, Matisse etc.) This was the artistic climate in which *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was brought into being, under the influence of many decisive encounters: with the works of Gauguin, Cézanne, Ingres and El Greco as well as the Iberian archeological remains from Cerro de los Santos

and Osuna and the so-called *Art nègre* which will be discussed in detail later on. Other important works that had an impact were the non-conformist nudes being painted at that time by Picasso's colleagues Derain and Matisse, especially the former's *Bathers* and the *Blue Nude* by the latter, both dated the same year as *Les Demoiselles*. This succession of unconventional female nudes that would become a moment of renewal of pictorial practices and expertise of their painters, was known as *La querelle du nu* (*The nude dispute*) (Joyeux-Prunel 2015, 356). As we shall see throughout this book the critics' evaluation of the impact each of these influences had on Picasso varies but irrespective of this, it is important to bear in mind the precise coordinates of this environment.

Readings for the Young Ladies

In general the work of the critic and of historians of art comprises many different tasks. They may include determining the genesis of a work and its genealogy or the chronology of its execution, researching and analysing the written or visual sources that inspired it or the personification and background of its creator. They may also include another type of interpretative task that is basically concerned with the history of how the work has been interpreted and the reception received by its contemporaries and the following generations. They also pay attention to the critical texts written about a work and the place it occupies in its historical artistic context. This is generally known as the "critical reception" of a work and this book is devoted to a historical appraisal of the successive interpretations that have been made about *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from its birth until the present day. Here, furthermore, we shall plead the case of the possible readings of this work that are specifically linked to the consideration of modern art itself because almost from the moment of its creation it has been considered one of modern art's masterpieces. In this sense *Les Demoiselles* are a perfect case study. Clearly the interpretations will depend often on the discovery of precise data and decisive details which will be revealed as necessary for understanding the critical discourse on the painting. And, surprising as it may seem, we shall also perceive a moment when the interpretations wrench themselves away from the precise data and instead of referring to the painting itself, they spawn themselves on the shoulders of previous explanations and often erode them. This is also part of the history of critical discourse of Modernism and that of the different perspectives of its evaluation. Its exploration will allow us to observe the confluence of ideas prevailing throughout the different cultural spheres. Perhaps more than a history, we should call this an archaeology of critique of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* because we are presenting an examination of the origin and evolution of the concept of modern art, or Modernism, combined with the analysis of the prejudices or ideologies that have upheld this notion for the last century.

One of the most fascinating phenomena of the Art History is precisely this convergence through which the interpretation of an image will also be a portrait of the subject that originated that interpretation. As Régis Débray observed in *Vie et mort de l'image*, a book subtitled *Une histoire du regard en Occident*:

The ventriloquist image speaks the language of its observer. And each era in the West has had its own way of reading the images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ and its own way of interpreting them. These “readings” tell us more about the epoch under consideration than about the paintings. They are as much a symptom as an analysis. (Débray 1994, 52).

We shall be looking at these “symptoms” of modern art. Because, fortunately, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* have always been considered a paradigm of Modernism in its one hundred years of existence it has been examined from many and varied points of view. Thus they have been read under the spotlights of many different methodologies including the formalist, the iconological, the structuralist and post-structuralist, the semiotic and, in general, all those that derive from what has come to be known as New Art History and those grouped under the more recent label of Global Art History, that include the contributions and propositions of Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, post-colonialism and transnational points of view. Such a wide assortment of gazes has fallen on *Les Demoiselles* during the century of time that they have been considered the yardstick of Modernism. Let us not forget that they compete with Duchamp's *The Large Glass* or his readymades for the title of maximum representative of the 20th century modern aesthetic. This is why following the history of the different interpretations that the painting has given rise to since 1907 will allow us to trace the itinerary of the critical reception of modern art or, better still, of the discourse of Modernism. We must bear in mind that all interpretation of art is also, whether recognised or not, judgement and taking sides and that keen and lively debates about art will be present in this book as well as debates of the system of values and ideologies that support these judgements and naturally their corresponding acquittals or convictions.

And as this book examines Modernism discourse we must also warn readers what do we mean with this word. It refers to a critical discourse, and not the artistic practice, of 20th century art that emphasises independence and self-referentiality as essential characteristics of 20th century art, and determinants that guide its history or evolution. Usually Modernism is understood to be a synonym of the formalist focus applied especially to the most innovative art produced at the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th century.⁴ This is the discourse, more than modern art itself, to which we have pledged this book. Although English-speaking criticism uses this terminology, it is true that Spanish or German historiography prefer to use the expression “vanguard” for referring to the narratives or theories of the avant-garde. However, in this critical discourse the English-speaking point of view has held sway and thus, we have based our research on it. Throughout the book we shall see how the fundamentals of the “orthodox narrative of Modernism” were being constructed and also demolished.

⁴ To understand Modernism as a critical discourse, consult Aruna D'Souza 2002.

Although some interpretations of a work of art may be more satisfactory than others, we shall commence by assuming that there is no single true story, that history is always plural, fruit of debate and conscious of its limits to construct transient narratives and small passing truths. The more complex and enigmatic the work, the more readings it will generate. This book would be meaningless without the firm conviction that a work of art is not something that emerges at a specific time and place with all its meanings in place. We believe that the meanings of works of art are always contingent, never inherent. The work of art also consists, above all, of the countless artistic reactions and critical interpretations that it generates through an extended period of time. The more valuable and interesting the work of art, the more widespread these will be. This is what Duchamp referred to when he talked of a work being a *machine à signifier*. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is not the exclusive property of this or that author. It is, rather, an accumulation of reactions and interpretations that have been changing enormously from the moment of its conception. And as we shall see, nor can we listen to just Picasso's declarations on the matter because works of art have meanings that escape the intention and control of their creator.

In this regard Mieke Bal's (1999) idea is crucial; it is the past and not the present that continually changes, or that it is the past that is continually in reconstruction, observed and valued from new points of view. It is a matter of taking works of art as happenings of the present, from subjective points of view, beyond the art historian of yesteryear who only used the third or impersonal person. He who was forbidden to use the terms "I", "we" and "now"... who had to conceal, by every means his own situation, his own biography, his own "optical unconscious vision".

Contexts

We shall begin with the premise that works of art have a life of their own, during which they become charged with new meanings. We have mentioned how different gazes acquire different perceptions. The variety of interpretations generated by a work of art is largely fruit of the contexts it encounters and therefore, our own encounters with it. Works of art are transformed by its continual moves, its relationship with contexts and people different to the author. It will encounter different audiences, different natural spaces, diverse historical contexts and a multitude of different discourses that will continually modify and transform the way it is received. Transnational focus of art history has drawn attention to the fact that works of art or their reproductions are usually subject to constant geographical and temporal circulation, amassing a "circulating capital" that is constantly being give new meaning as Appadurai (1986) suggested. The circulating capital of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* today is globally vast.

We must, at the outset, recognise the fact that the quality of the different reproductions of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* lend it different aspects: more or less Expressionist, more or less Cubist. Let us not forget that most of time art historians have to work with reproductions of works that we have on hand in our

books or computers, rarely with originals. For example, the reproductions where the colours are more saturated than in the original overload it with dramatic accents that would incline us towards a hint of Expressionism. On the other hand, when the colours are less bright and more pastel or if the reproduction in black and white emphasises the form, we would undoubtedly lean towards its pictorial innovations representing volume and space. Then we would perceive it as a clear candidate to join or lead the history of Cubism.

The aspect of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* are also different in the rooms at the MoMA where it reigns in the place of honour that corresponds to an authentic paradigm of Modernism rather than on the pages of a book or the photographs that show it on display in different locations. For example when we see them surrounded by the members of the MoMA board of trustees, the brilliant company and the place itself emphasise their relevance. In earlier black and white photos with Picasso's intimate friends posing in attitudes and attire typical of the start of the 20th century the difference in time that separates us from the moment of the painting's execution is remarkable. The work appears less contemporaneous as it were. In the home of its first buyer, on the staircase of Jacques Doucet's Paris apartment, they share the decidedly *déco chic* decoration that emphasises their character as a cultural and socio-economic status symbol. The impression they produce in the succession of Picasso's studios is also different as in the guise of the tapestry hanging in La Californie, that brings us face to face with the subject of reproductions of works of art. From personal experience I can vouch that they acquire a very different personality if we see them out in the street. In 2006 an initiative sponsored by the Fundación Picasso hung an enormous reproduction on the facade of *La Equitativa* building in the city of Malaga on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the painter's birth under the slogan *Málaga, su mejor lienzo* ("Malaga, his best canvas"). In this open air, public space it upheld a dialogue with other urban icons of the city: the memorial to the Marquis of Larios and his cohorts for example, or at Christmas time with the city Nativity scene. I must confess that the encounter between the most famous prostitutes in the history of art and the images of the Holy Family caused a very deep impression.

Thus, the questionable, if not mistaken notion, that art extends to everyone equally because all human beings possess the same tools of sensitive perception, while among art historians the (false) belief that the historical-artistic discourse is objective, and scientific, neutral and unconditioned, spreads. So, just as the existence of an innocent spectator, un-conditioned even by his minimal knowledge of art and culture is a chimera, nor are there innocent art historians. The more proof of ideological neutrality, of scientific asepsia the defenders of certain, presumed scientific methodologies, try to present, the more suspect they are of harbouring biased values and ideologies on their historical narrative. No matter how much an art historian insists that there is only one true history of art, the more untruthful and mythomaniac they appear, as well as oppressive and authoritarian. For some time now responsible art historians have, fortunately, put aside the idea that their task is based on

the existence of a truth that must be revealed, in discovering this *aletheia* in a sort of search for the Holy Grail. So now, a part of the present focus of art history is consciously accepting the construct character that all historical narrative possesses and therefore, its temporal, contingent, partial and ideologically conditioned nature.

In this book we have been putting together a patient deconstruction of the prevailing historical-artistic discourses on the subject of Modernism. In many cases they are characterised by their firm resistance to any kind of dissuasion, protected as they are by their institutional (read academic) authority although this opposition would never be openly recognised. To accomplish this task I have had to make a selection of texts on *Les Demoiselles* that would be sufficiently representative of the different methodological approaches used to analyse the work and the different proposals on modernity on which these approaches are based. For this reason I have been more interested in the high degree of representativity of the texts, rather than a revision of each. This representativity depends, logically, on my objectives that are to show the transformation of art history discipline and the evolution, throughout the last century, of the notion of Modernism applied to 20th century art. Thus the texts I have chosen represent or are examples of certain methodological positions and we shall show how they involve certain postulates on the notion of vanguard/modernity, or how they contributed to draw up these notions. The majority of the texts come from the English-speaking sphere of criticism that dominated discourse from a particular moment in the 20th century and it is possible to tell a story from them because their authors rebut and respond.

This book does not intend, therefore, to be a contribution to the studies on Picasso. Rather, it is concerned with the genealogy and evolution of the episteme or discursive formation of modern art. It is an account of the interpretation of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* as a means of investigating the critical discourse of Modernism. Although we follow the thread of this account by basing it on the said painting, this book is about writings inspired by this work of art. If the task may seem too theoretical, this is deliberate. Perhaps because, as Jonathan Harris (2001, 27–8) observed, the idea that art historians are only interested in the works of art themselves is not entirely true. Or perhaps it is because any attention paid, description made or vision of objects ultimately requires a language, ideas, values and a conventional means of communication to transmit the sharing of ideas on the work. Any visual attention calls for, previously or simultaneously, intellectual or theoretical specifications.

In fact, I will espouse the arguments in defense of theory sustained by Jonathan Harris:

Theory was (and is needed) in this sense both to allow understanding of existing traditions of thought and disciplinary practice—the critique of existing ‘institutionally dominant art history’—and to allow us to invent and mobilise forms of argument and procedures of description, analysis, and evaluation required in the formulation of alternatives to the dominant practices.

‘Text/context’ formulations, arguably part of any radical art-historical practice, are *theoretical* in this sense. That is, they are based on principles of selection, articulated through the concepts and values that have ethical and social roots and implications. To recognise the theoretical sense of any art-historical account is to recognise its provisional, constructed, and therefore potentially revisable nature. Theory understood in this way represents a liberation from imposed orthodoxy, in its pedagogic or professional institutional forms, and is thus a necessary part of a politics for social and intellectual change (Harris 2001, 28).

I set out convinced that it is possible to produce a history of art that reveals its own words, its own practices and strategies whether they repress or liberate. It is a vision of history that will bring to light the ideologies, values and prejudices that decide how the historical narratives will be written. Thus it is a plural history that recognises the effervescence of the competing narratives, that we normally refer to in the singular and therefore erroneously, as its history. In summary, this text is about those values and ideologies that build historical and artistic narratives.

It is a reflection on the episteme of Modernism, understanding this to be (as Foucault suggests) the system of interpretation that conditions our way of understanding the aesthetics of Modernism and offers us a codified gaze. It intends to be a reflection on this episteme especially through the responses generated on the ways of making a canonical history of Modernism. We are aware that many of the postulates that encouraged us to tell this story of critical reception of Modernism through *Les Femmes d'Alger* originate from the new history of art and global history of art points of view and especially the epistemological field of gender and feminist studies. In this latter field the traditional monograph (or hagiography) on the male genius is substituted by a study of artistic concepts, consideration of terms and artistic practices, production and artistic reception. The claim of the universality of art and the artistic experience is rejected in advance and replaced with “situated knowledge” and the value of subjectivity. In the same way, within these epistemological coordinates, art is understood not as a mirror of reality but as its construction, heeding the performative character of all representation. We understand thus, that historiographical debates or attention to the critical reception of the works must have priority. In other words, they constitute the solid framework of the historical-artistic narrative. Recently the writer Chamananda Ngozi Adichie stated now “is the moment for a range of voices. Not because we want to be politically correct but because we want to be precise. We cannot understand the world if we continue to pretend that just a small part of it represents the whole” (Chamananda, 2018).

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Fig. 1. Members of MoMA New York board of trustees in front of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* at the opening of the exhibition *Art of our Time* (photographed by Herbert Gehr on 8 May 1939) and published in *Life Magazine* on 22 May 1939. © 2022. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

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