

Preface

A Particular Brand of Modernism

Imagine a college course: “Ordinary Objects in Interwar American Modernism.” What would a course like this encompass? Let’s indulge this exercise.

It would be useful to begin with a unit explaining the material conditions of the interwar period, conditions that enabled and encouraged artistic attention to objects. This unit would cover mass production, consumerism, and the ideologies that went with them, variously called “Fordism,” “Taylorism,” or just “Americanization.” The class could then proceed through a host of different cultural productions in which the ordinary object or “thing” featured prominently. Industrial design and exhibition displays would have to top that list. That way, students would learn not only about the products, styles, and philosophies that people like Raymond Loewy or Walter Dorwin Teague put forth but also something about the primary vehicle by which their names became household: all those “art-in-industry” showcases held nationwide. This would introduce the object world of American modernism literally, as real stuff destined for real places.

Then to the “fine arts” proper, where mere stuff is transformed so expediently into metaphor. But where to begin? Literature is a good place: kick things off with William Carlos Williams, preach the gospel of “no ideas but in things,” and put that red wheelbarrow on the table straightaway.¹ So much will depend

on it. Round things out with works by the transatlantics Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein. Then move into film and music. Hold screenings of Ralph Steiner's *Mechanical Principles*; behold Pare Lorentz's plow, dead in its tracks on wind-blown plains. Have the students close their eyes. Play Antheil. Play Gershwin. Have them count how many sounds seem to come from objects other than instruments. Have them reconsider that word "instrument." Next up: gallery arts. Photography could take weeks—Steiner again, then Steichen and Stieglitz, Sheeler and Strand. Leave New York. Go to California for Weston and Cunningham. Leave with Weston for Mexico; meet Modotti. Tour the South: Alabama with Evans, Mississippi with Rothstein. The slide lists that week would look something like this:

typewriter, match sticks, apple
plumbing trap, wire wheel
bell pepper, calla lily
guitar and gourd
tin plate, water pail, pair of shoes

Then on to the other arts. Sculpture brings its ready-mades (Duchamp, Man Ray, Baroness Elsa), its wind-up toys and circuses (Calder). Painting would contribute its portraits—not of personalities, but of things very nearly endowed. O'Keeffe's girl stuff: flowers and pelvic bones. Murphy's boy stuff: cigars, razor, watch. Sheeler's Shaker stuff: chairs, rugs, and bent-wood boxes. Dove's foraged stuff: collages he called "things." And Davis's household stuff: Odol-brand deodorant and eggbeaters. And look at Demuth's poster portraits in which he conjured friends out of totems: winter squashes, cabaret masks, and a figure five—that last for "Carlo," with whom we began.

At this point in our exercise, it's becoming harder and harder to tell what distinguishes this imagined course from any other on American modernism as such—except that this one seems too big. (The others would probably obey more circumscribed disciplinary limits: a class each for music, cinema, and the visual arts, at least.) The lesson we learn, then, is this: the role of things in American modernism was significant enough to have accounted for most of it. Put another way, if one were to draw a Venn diagram of modernist things and modernism written large, well . . . the effect would look something like a solar eclipse.

So, what was it about things that made them so important for modernism in the United States? Why should objects—whether machine-made, handmade, or natural—have become such an important organizing principle for culture? How did materiality come to serve so handily as the suture point between modernism and modernity?

This book offers only partial answers to these questions. But responding to them with anything like a “complete” answer is probably a bad idea, anyway. If modern artists seized upon objects as their subjects—and if they did so as a way to help define art’s relevance to a radically changing world—they were nothing if not uncertain about what kind of attitude to adopt. Steichen’s matchsticks look pretty jazzy. They should. He photographed them as part of a commercial commission. But Modotti’s guitar strikes a different note—a played-out thing serving as foundation for two more-alluring others, a bandolier and sickle. Demuth’s figure five makes things out of language, but Weston’s bell peppers and seashells look as though they’ve run out of words (so recumbent in purity or prurience). The experimental films of Steiner and Lorentz reveal modernity’s inner workings, bursting it open with “the dynamite of the tenth of a second” (to employ Walter Benjamin’s memorable phrase from the same period).² But Murphy’s still lifes moved slower, glimpsing death and destiny in pen and razor. In the flowers, O’Keeffe saw herself—or others did—as an enigmatic feminine presence. For all the ubiquity of objects in interwar modernism, their presence doesn’t do much by way of supplying an artistic or ideological common denominator. Instead, their presence seems to have been used in each case as an opportunity: an occasion for the artist to pursue different stylistic and philosophical postures relative to the world.

Above, I said that any answers as to the question “why” would have to be partial—“partial” in the same sense hinted at by “particular.” In what follows, I describe my subject of inquiry—the Museum of Modern Art’s (MOMA) *Machine Art* exhibition—as a “particular brand of modernism.” In so doing, I insist that the kind of modernism I’m describing here—one ventured by two young, white American men at a small museum in Manhattan over the course of six weeks in 1934—should not be taken as any definition of modernism as such. Instead, the modernism on offer here *is* particular, sharing some of its attributes with other modernisms (especially “straight photography” and precisionism in the United States, the Bauhaus in Germany, purism in France, and de Stijl in the Netherlands), but claiming some idiosyncrasies all to itself. As with the other functionalist and idealist projects from which it derived its inspiration, *Machine Art* was culturally and aesthetically conservative. This feature alone set it apart from many other modernisms, those more-commonly conjured versions that delighted in the tactics of invention, experimentation, or negation. If *Machine Art* was a modern art exhibition, it was “modern” only in a particular sense. The diversity of interwar modernism is simply a historical fact (perhaps especially in the United States, where no national school held sway), and it overrides any art historical urges toward defining *the* idea of modernism as such. We’re left with only a Heraclitean option, then: defining modernism not by reference to

any overarching principle but to its lack thereof—by its diversity rather than its unity.

So, “particular” is my four-syllable stand against totalizing narratives of modernism. It is also a way, then, of making common cause with scholars who have insisted upon modernism’s diversity: an insistence that has sought to preserve the indeterminacies and contingencies of its gestures—always made in awkward two-step with that other m-word, “modernity.” In what follows, I preserve the traditional academic distinction between “modernism” (a set of cultural, artistic practices) and “modernity” (the technological and political procedures by which global economies were transformed in the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). This is a Marxist, base/superstructure distinction, but it need not be a deterministic one. Insofar as I retain T. J. Clark’s sense of modernism as a renegotiated response to modernity, I also preserve for this definition its principled sense of openness. When Clark maintains that “there are always many modernisms”—and characterizes all of them as “a distinctive patterning of mental and technical *possibilities*”—he is effectively making good on what historian of science Bruno Latour recommends as the best way to represent the production of knowledge: not as moving toward some foregone conclusion, but as openly receptive to any possible outcome.³ The shift that Latour urges on historians is that we become more process-oriented than product-obsessed. Clark’s history of modernism concurs; his collection of noncongruent case studies explicitly seeks to retain modernism’s experimental ethos—all the better, in Clark’s view, to keep its revolutionary promise alive.

The work of many other art historians, independently and in concert, yields this same picture of indeterminacy. Wanda Corn has been influential in this regard, asserting the existence of “modernisms” (plural) instead of “modernism” (singular). In her seminal work on interwar American art, *The Great American Thing*, she is explicit in her aim to preserve something of what Latour was also getting after: a sense of the art historical past which conveys its lived sense of collaboration, its “let’s-see-what-happens” headiness. For example, she chooses to call her protagonists “moderns.”⁴ This period jargon gives her a way, first, to avoid the more mandarin descriptors of historical writing, “Dadaist,” “precisionist,” “poet,” or “painter”—terms that narrowly constrain the actions of individuals and groups who were either not privy to such designations (“precisionism” was coined many years after the movement) or who relished in superseding them. But, even given this openness, there are always more horizons to broaden, perhaps especially regarding the particular *people* who have and have not been included in the literature. Corn’s fellow Americanist, Mary Ann Calo, has drawn attention to this problem, especially as it remains unresolved in *The Great American Thing*. Calo notes that, for all Corn’s emphasis on modernism’s open, unfolding indeterminacy, her book still fails to take account of the

parallel and overlapping experiments of ethnically marked artistic groups, what Ann Douglas referred to as the “mongrel” aspect of modernism in the United States, particularly in New York City.⁵

Beyond studies in U.S. modernism, art historical writing on early-twentieth-century and interwar modernism abroad comes to much the same multiheaded conclusion as to its diversity. Work like Nancy Troy’s, which draws careful attention to the considerable overlap between modernism and the marketplace—not just practically speaking, but ideologically, too—defies many of the earlier pieties about modernism, assertions of either its rarefied autonomy or its unerring political radicalism.⁶ The latter piety is only further diminished by the histories written by Mark Cheetham and Kenneth Silver (both especially influential to this present study), who have drawn our attention to the wide streak of cultural conservatism that ran through the so-called avant-garde.⁷ Likewise, Rosalind Krauss’s *Picasso Papers* also draws attention to the almost schizophrenic nature of modernism, including its flip-flops between radical defiance and conservative retreat—and this all in the career of a single artist, whose claims to modernism can in no way be disputed.⁸ I am invested in multiplicity and contradiction, too, this time as it may be perceived—as it in fact *was* perceived—in *Machine Art*.

But let’s get something clear straightaway. To a large extent, it was all of this diversity in early-twentieth-century modernism that *Machine Art* sought to cure. In fact, by acknowledging not only the diversity of modernism in the 1910s, ’20s, and ’30s but also its *open-ended indeterminacy*, I take a stand that runs directly afoul of the stated intentions of my case study. In *Machine Art*, Alfred H. Barr Jr. and Philip Johnson harbored some serious pretensions to universal absolutism and capital-t Truth: principles they presented as modernism’s common cause. Insisting so compulsively that this exhibit illustrates only a “particular brand of modernism,” then—rather than the universal toward which it so plainly aspired—is a mark of stubbornness on my part. It’s also more than a little bit antagonistic. If I want to strenuously resist the idea that *Machine Art* articulates *the* principles of modernism, or even *the* principles of MOMA, some of this resistance is mounted against the legacies of Barr and Johnson themselves (but especially Barr’s).

In fact, given the reputation and real estate that MOMA now commands, my inquiry is staged right in the heart of hegemonic, or “high,” modernism. Saying so has traditionally not been a compliment. In an early examination of MOMA itself as an institution, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach critiqued the museum’s Hegelian presentation of modern art as inevitable, preordained, and directed always toward an artistic good.⁹ Such a triumphalist march of the “isms” held no allure for these two art historians when they wrote their landmark article in 1980 (for the first issue of *Marxist Quarterly*); they deemed it totalizing,

exclusionary, and excessively formalist—meaning that they saw the museum’s myopic attention to stylistic and artistic developments to be irresponsibly blinkered. Formalism made MOMA’s galleries flow seamlessly one into the other; but it wrongly prioritized artistic principles above all other considerations, including history and society. By contrast, Duncan and Wallach were keenly attentive to what *was* historical and social about MOMA’s formalism. Namely, they drew devastating attention to how the museum’s pretensions to artistic purity had an undeniably political byproduct: an almost exclusively male line of modernist inheritance for one thing, a buffeting of American-style capitalism for another.

This book is undeniably shaped by Duncan and Wallach’s early example. In fact, it shares some of its antagonism. That is, I am similarly interested in investigating MOMA’s formalism as a set of historical practices—as an intellectual object of creation, promulgated by real historical actors and in real historical time. I am also necessarily indebted to the very starting point of Duncan and Wallach’s article: to the presupposition that MOMA itself is worthy of art historical, historical, and ideological analysis. This maneuver to turn the art museum into a work of art rendered MOMA amenable to art historical methods of investigation (Duncan and Wallach called their investigation “iconographic”). It is also the necessary starting point for the entire field of museum studies, and has especially motivated histories of MOMA—many of which have been more charitable toward the institution than Duncan and Wallach once were.

Analyzing the full apparatus of display, including architecture, arrangement, signage, publications, and museum education, Mary Anne Staniszewski’s *The Power of Display* ultimately leaves the reader doubting Duncan and Wallach’s bottom line—or at least more insistent on the nuances that must attend it.¹⁰ Indeed, Staniszewski’s richly detailed study explodes two myths simultaneously, and does so precisely by dint of detail. Given a broader view of MOMA’s practices, including its many and often competing curatorial programs (including those invested in ethnographic arts, political propaganda, and the arts of Western everyday life), the reader can sustain neither the myth of modernist uniformity, nor the idea that MOMA has always and unerringly beat that drum. This is not to say that Staniszewski’s portrayal depicts either a truly schizophrenic museum or a wholly diversified modernism. In her account, she rightly retains the institution’s dogmatic reputation, especially noting its “inability to acknowledge the ideological dimensions of art” and its perennial insistence on “autonomous aesthetics.”¹¹ Nonetheless, by drawing such careful attention to the *practices* carried out in this museum—looking at the installation designs of different shows, the motivations of different curators and directors, and the various responses of MOMA’s large public audience—*The Power of Display* shines a spotlight on exactly the intellectual and ideological histories that MOMA itself is rarely good at displaying.

Terry Smith, in his landmark book, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (1993), ranges much more widely over interwar American modernism than just the part played in it by MOMA; his study is of a piece both with Staniszewski's and with the likes of Corn and others discussed above. Moreover, like Duncan and Wallach, Smith's book is especially attentive to the crossovers between cultural capital and financial capital. Writing about "corporate avant-gardists," Smith demonstrates that the interests of machine-age business and those of machine-age art were frequently identical—especially when it came to glorifying principles of efficiency and utility.¹² This line of argument (as Smith develops it across a number of case studies, including *Machine Art*) is useful to the present study, as is his conceit of the "photomodern": important to my first chapter and especially lucid on the epistemological fit between photography as a mechanical technique of reproduction and the ideological demands of representing the machine in modernism.¹³

Making the Modern is also in keeping with the other literature on MOMA in that it not only seeks to examine the visual mechanisms of meaning-making practiced in that museum (Smith is as interested in installation design as is Staniszewski), but it also demonstrates a commitment to examining the institutional and intellectual histories that stood behind them. In Smith's case, this attention has led him to the same tempering of ideological critique apparent in Staniszewski's later monograph. Even as Smith sees the interests of big business and high modernism united in MOMA's early programs, he also sees how the museum's hard-line functionalism was ultimately at odds with the desire-stoking industries of product design and advertising: the larger capitalist complex Smith dubs "Life-style" modernism (after the popular magazine that got its start in this era).

More recent publications on MOMA's early history likewise situate its institutional formation in relation to machine-age consumerism but qualify this term by triangulating it against New Deal-era populism. This three-way relationship is very much at the heart of A. Joan Saab's *For the Millions: American Art and Culture between the Wars*. In this volume, both MOMA and *Machine Art* serve as examples of what Saab views as a broad-based shift toward the "desacralization" of art: its more democratic, if also market-driven, dissemination of culture and good taste.¹⁴ What was particularly progressive about MOMA's early design exhibitions, on Saab's useful reading, was the attention they paid to both affordability and reliable practicality: values easily relatable to a mass audience and often crucially important in their day-to-day decision making. Again, a more expansive view of MOMA does not obliterate earlier skepticisms; Saab notes that the "populist" tenets of good design at MOMA were always decreed from the top-down.¹⁵ Moreover, to the extent that Saab has paid attention to the deeply philosophical conversations about democracy and experience in the

1930s (she gives ample air time to John Dewey, as I do in chapter 4), she also adds new historical texture to the understanding of how and why *Machine Art* promoted consumer goods as “art.” Consumerism is no longer so simply the ideological beguilement theorized by the Frankfurt school.

Kristina Wilson agrees and she, too, takes a broadly cultural and intellectual approach to understanding the operation of museum display during the interwar years. In *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition*, Wilson is especially keen to understand how new modes of exhibiting new sorts of art helped to coalesce a broad-based “public” for modernism: a strategy that necessitated a fair amount of cross-pollinating between the “high” and the “low.”¹⁶ In other words, Wilson is curious about how modernism appropriated democratizing discourses—from Dewey to the department store—for its survival and expansion. Like Staniszewski, Wilson treats exhibition practice itself as a form of art making, and her work is especially useful for contextualizing MOMA’s innovation within the history of American avant-garde display, a tradition that includes both Alfred Stieglitz’s experiments at his so-called Gallery 291 and the *Little Review*’s radical *Machine-Age Exposition*, staged in 1927, a clear precedent for *Machine Art*, and central to my discussion here (particularly in chapter 1).

In part, histories of MOMA lend themselves to intellectual history so easily because of the personalities of its principle actors, *especially* Johnson and Barr. Johnson’s personal biography is particularly rich, since his activities throughout the twentieth century seemed always to track precisely the leading trends of art and architecture, culture and politics. A lovable character with a number of unlovely personal chapters, Johnson became most visible to me through two channels: his own writings (especially the letters penned to his mother during the later 1920s and early ’30s, housed at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles), and Franz Schulze’s 1994 biography.¹⁷ Barr, too, wore his personality on his sleeve in his many writings, including those published in MOMA’s many catalogs and those painstakingly archived in his own personal files (now making up the august Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, much consulted by me and countless other art historians, whether writing on MOMA or not). The best supplement to Barr himself is the careful biography by Sybil Gordon Kantor. This volume serves as an extremely useful and sensitive institutional history in its own right—as viewed from the “intellectual origins” she traces in the life and mind of its first director.¹⁸ Again, the ideas that circulated around the broad social space of the Museum of Modern Art permit a more rich understanding of the institution itself, as well as the historical period to which it gave such forceful witness.

As is the case with modernism then, MOMA, too, seems to appear only less monolithic the longer one looks at it. Hence, again, “particular.”

Late in the project, however—later than I’d like to admit—“particular” came to reveal itself to me as descriptive in another way, too. Not just “particu-

lar” in the slightly belittling way it means “only one out of many,” but also as it describes something specific: a single phenomenon, an irreducibly unique little thing, an unrepeatable happening—something so singular and nubby and inas-similable as to defy even a Goliath like generalization. David’s rock.

In his wonderful book *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, the intellectual histo-ri-ian Edward A. Purcell ventured a definition of modernism in interwar Ameri-can thought that’s kindred to what I’ve been sketching out here. Purcell’s topic was the early-twentieth-century rise of what he called “scientific naturalism”: an epistemological orientation that he also variously named positivism, nomi-nalism, objectivism, physicalism, functionalism, pragmatism, realism, and—yes—particularism.¹⁹ Charting the life and influence of this idea in a dizzying variety of fields (politics, social sciences, philosophy, and physics, to name a few), he discerned a unifying belief: “for a concept to be valid and meaningful it had to refer directly to an individual, concrete thing.”²⁰ Hence: particularism.

If particularism was an underlying current running through American in-tellectual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and Dwight MacDonal-d, though uncharitably, would agree that it was), it was certainly on spec-tacular display in *Machine Art*, where concrete facts and obdurate particu-lars were made to stand for loftier, more esoteric ideals.²¹ This book, focused on a single case study, shares in the particularism it investigates. To borrow a line from historian Alan Trachtenberg, I might say that “the subject itself produced the method.”²²

In this effort to interpret a particular brand of modernism—and through one of its particulars—this book is also joined to the rich body of scholarly liter-ature that has come to be known collectively as “thing theory.” In 2001, the jour-nal *Critical Inquiry* published a special issue titled “Things,” edited by the literary scholar and critic Bill Brown.²³ The volume remains influential. At the time, it served not only to baptize an academic turn (Brown’s introduction was titled “Thing Theory”), but also as a way to collect the rich and widely varied think-ing about the role of materiality in cultural life.²⁴ Thus, Brown’s introduction pointed readers in two useful directions: back into the history of philosophical thingness (Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, William James, Marcel Mauss, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others), and out into the lively dialogues that had already been taking place all over the humanities (as seen in the work of, for instance, Arjun Appadurai in anthropology, Christina Kiaer in art his-tory, Bruno Latour in sociology, and Michel Serres in philosophy).

But, Brown’s *Critical Inquiry* special issue was by no means alone in venturing a manifesto on materiality. Material culture studies already enjoyed a healthy life in England, especially as nurtured by the Marxist tradition of cultural stud-ies and as led by Daniel Miller. Miller has been prodigious in his contributions; but his *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* has especially supported my

inquiry, this through its studious attention to the historical emergence of materiality, and by its focus on the economic grounds—or material conditions—of modern thingness.²⁵ Other contributions to the discourse tend to break down more along camp lines: anthropology, archaeology, historical archaeology, and the museological field of the “decorative arts.”²⁶ Of these, the sensitive readings of materiality as it relates to *value* in anthropological contexts—chiefly issued from the pens of Appadurai, Fred Myers, Christopher Steiner, and Webb Keane—have left the biggest impression on this present study.²⁷ Indeed, my interests in thing theory have resonated most strongly at its point of intersection with the social science traditions of Karl Marx and Georg Simmel, who both examined money as an object that exercised its power *both* through physical presence *and* symbolic absence—a flickering that structured how *Machine Art’s* objects worked, too.

Talk of doubleness leads me to mention the delicate balance that I’ve tried to strike here: a balance between two, sometimes opposing interests. My first concern is with historical responsibility—acknowledging both that thingness and materiality come into particular view at different times, in different places, for different people, and that the epistemic regimes that mark those views might, ironically, be best known through the paper trail of discourse.²⁸ My second concern is with the matter of stuff, in the most colloquial sense. Brown invokes “the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power” and illustrates materiality’s immediacy with a list of vivid, somatic reminders: “you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut.”²⁹ For Brown, these moments bring us back into a world of things and remind us that we are but one among them. As I handle it here, *this* kind of thingness—an “excess” and a “latency,” in Brown’s formulation, inassimilable to the surety of discourse, the abstraction of thought, or the objectivity of academic art history—*this* kind of thingness appears in my text much as it would in the course of everyday life.³⁰ That is to say, everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time.

Things *were* everywhere in *Machine Art*. That is the point—or my point, anyway. The exhibition was a treatise on abstraction carried out through the medium of materiality. As I see it, what was in play was the presentation of physical objects as proof of abstraction—an empirical proof, one might say, the credible guarantee of the thing-right-there-in-front-of-you. And I am interested in the historical production of these objects as guarantees: a historically emergent production that banked upon materiality but doesn’t get us any closer to understanding its infamous philosophical quiddity. *That* kind of materiality can never really appear here; it will always remain just outside the focus of analytic scrutiny—its invisible wizard, necessarily behind the curtain. *Machine Art’s* materiality evades reexperience except by description (on my part) and sympa-

thetic imagination (on yours). This drama, especially, is at the heart of the last chapter. It is ultimately also the drama from which modernist aesthetics—and perhaps even modernism, as such—derives its abiding potency.

So, when I write of *Machine Art*'s "particular brand of modernism," I hope you'll understand what haunts this phrase: a commitment to modernism's dynamic and self-contradicting plurality, as well as a commitment to art history as it might rest on particulars. But behind it, most of all, stand these particulars: the more than six hundred objects on view in Barr and Johnson's show—steel beams, switchboards, kitchen ranges, kitchen sinks, door hinges, motor springs, tea kettles, saucepans, dessert forks, cordial glasses, calipers, slide rules, measured beakers, and more. That *Machine Art* hoped to turn all of this particularism against itself and into a basis for absolutism—well, that's the story this book seeks to tell.



Figure 1 Façade of original townhouse housing the Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53rd Street, showing a Calder mobile displayed during the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, March 2, 1936–April 19, 1936, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.)