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Kristina Wilson

The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934

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In *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934*, Kristina Wilson examines the various rhetorical, cultural, and curatorial framing devices through which highly influential New York museums and galleries actively engaged in audience-building for modern American art during a pivotal inter-war decade. Throughout this beautifully illustrated and fascinating volume, Wilson explores the culturally resonant themes and strategies that united the otherwise diverse activities of Alfred Stieglitz and his later circle (chapter 1); the curators and trustees who organized *The Architect and the Industrial Arts* exhibition (1929) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (chapter 2); the conceptions of national cultural identity that shaped the early exhibitions of American painting and sculpture that Alfred H. Barr, Jr. staged at the Museum of Modern Art (1929–1932, chapter 3); and the complex spiritual and material qualities associated with modern technology that informed the “machine art” exhibitions sponsored by the literary magazine *The Little Review* (1927) and by Barr and his colleague Philip Johnson at MoMA in 1934 (chapter 4). In focusing on these prominent exhibitions and institutions, Wilson discerns an ambivalent positioning in which modern art was located between a broad, popular-culture appeal and an elite cachet that hovered well above the quotidian base of modern life. As Wilson aptly points out, the exhibitions that constitute the focal points of her study “must be viewed as sites where the mutual influences of high and low cultures were made manifest, where . . . [the] ‘imaginary’ divide of high and low was continually evoked, transgressed, and reconstituted” (7).

As this critical formulation suggests, the modern eye that Wilson reconstructs is a binocular one, a doubled lens that incorporates multiple cultural domains and brings them into a coherent, composite perspective. This interpretive approach is most forcefully exemplified by the chapter “Virtue, Vice, and Modern Design at the Metropolitan.” In it, Wilson undertakes a close, comparative analysis of *The Architect and the Industrial Arts* exhibition, a show that featured open, three-sided display vignettes in which each room was presented as a total environment designed and furnished by a single architect. Installation shots of the exhibition are juxtaposed with the ornate stage sets featured in contemporary MGM films, commercial showroom displays at R. H. Macy and Company, and the elaborately furnished period rooms in the Metropolitan’s own American Wing. Viewed collectively, these materials shed important light on the complex intertwining of interiors and exteriors, private desires and public appearances, microcosms and macrocosms. Yet as Wilson points out, the real subject of the exhibition was not so much an executive’s angular geometric desk or the sensuous curves of a lady’s boudoir table, but the creative envisioning of an ideal modern lifestyle and its accompanying social values. As such, the exhibition’s imaginative interiors reflected larger conceptions of fantasy, escapism, entertainment, education, and cultural mythologizing, which found suggestive counterparts in Hollywood cinema, department store displays, museum period rooms, and even in the habitat rooms of natural history museums. Moreover, Wilson further demonstrates that the exhibition not only presented an elevated vision of a glamorous lifestyle, but that it simultaneously affirmed such conservative social values as moral restraint, practical efficiency, and appropriate gender roles which, in turn, mirrored the museum curators’ and trustees’ own conceptions of a good society.

Equally impressive is “Spiritual and Material Gods in the Machine Age.” In this intriguing chapter, Wilson walks readers through the *Machine-Age Exposition* that Jane Heap, editor of the *Little Review*, organized in 1927, as well as the *Machine Art* exhibition that

Barr and Johnson assembled at MoMA in 1934. Not surprisingly, both shows emphasized the simultaneously functional and aesthetic qualities of modern machines, thereby positing a mutually enhancing relation between the practical and artistic domains. An especially intriguing dimension of this counter-positioning can be found in Wilson's discussion of Heap's being inspired by the philosophy of G. I. Gurdjieff, a popular mystic who celebrated the machine's ability to improve the material conditions of life *and* promote an enhanced understanding of the universal principles of integration and cooperation. Notably, such a thematic intertwining of the material and the spiritual, the esoteric and the exoteric realms was also evident in Stieglitz's programming at the Intimate Gallery, a space that similarly accommodated strategic conjunctions of the elevated and the popular, the microcosm and the macrocosm. Indeed, Stieglitz perceived such a sense of expansive possibility in the relatively limited space of the Intimate Gallery that he told his friend, the author Sherwood Anderson, that the little room "breathe[s] a cathedral feeling" (as quoted on p. 25).

Yet if Stieglitz's and Heap's artistic projects advanced interwoven visions of aesthetics and technology as sites of physical and metaphysical power, the approach that Barr and Johnson adopted slightly later in the *Machine Art* show was decidedly more commercial. As Wilson reconstructs, not only did the clean lines and shining surfaces of the exhibited items evoke the showroom and the warehouse as much as the museum gallery, but the accompanying catalogue included a price list and consumer purchasing information. In this way, the *Machine Art* show at the Modern resonated with the *Architect and the Industrial Arts* exhibition at the Metropolitan since, in both installations, the simultaneously artistic and functional qualities of modern design effectively served as ambivalent cultural signifiers of "morally improving, socially equalizing frugality, and . . . as a sign of cultured taste" (183).

Indeed, the modernist curatorial trajectory that Wilson traces throughout this study encompasses the realms of the popular and the privileged, the exoteric and the esoteric, the public and the private, the spaces outside of the museum's walls and inside its galleries and back out again onto the streets of the city. In both the third and fourth chapters of the book, MoMA functions as a salient bridge between these domains, just as it places these historical and cultural categories into mutually meaningful interrelation. These critical intersections are especially evident in the vision of modern American painting and sculpture that Barr cultivated during the museum's first three years (1929–1932) through acquisition activities and exhibition practices that Wilson characterizes as representing "a vital commentary on the state of society and the quality of daily life in the nation, and, in so doing, promot[ing] the art as a tool for forging a national self-identity" (100). Once again, the artworks and the shows in which they were featured were seen as simultaneous reflections of cultural privilege and social commonality, attributes that in turn reflected various facets of the museum's own public identity. Taking Edward Hopper's iconic painting *House by the Railroad* (1925) as exemplary of this multivalent positioning, Wilson persuasively makes the case for a socially engaged Barr and for an alternatively democratic and elitist MoMA, as an institution where aesthetics could accommodate a shared vision of everyday life while promoting an escapist fantasy of wealth and power that held particular cultural attraction during the harsh years of the Depression.

The Modern Eye is a needed and important book. Yet Wilson's text is uneven. Her study would have benefited from more in-depth analyses of individual works of art, and there are some important references missing, both from her text and her bibliography. For example, given the multifaceted complexities associated with machines and mechanomorphic forms during the twenties and thirties, there is surprisingly little discussion of the legacy of New York Dada in general and of Marcel Duchamp in particular. While brief reference is made to Duchamp's readymades, Wilson's analysis does not include a sustained consideration of the mutually informing relations between the elite and the popular domains that famously characterized Duchamp's artistic production, nor does she consider the ways in which mechanization served as a multivalent site of proximity and distance, of desire and impossibility, within Duchamp's influential oeuvre. Moreover, while her analysis of the historical and cultural developments of the twenties and thirties is quite nuanced, there is considerable oversimplification in the brief discussions of the period following the Second World War that appear at the beginning and end of her study. These years were distinguished by critical formulations of the "objective eye" as associated with Abstract Expressionist painting—particularly with the artworks' ostensible qualities of self-referentiality and autonomy—and which were cultivated in modernist curatorial contexts that both reflected *and* belied a deep cultural embeddedness in shared conceptions of subjects and subjectivities.

The special strength of Wilson's book lies in her carefully layered analyses of the conjoined institutional and cultural histories of the twenties and thirties, and the ways in which these histories were shaped by—and, in turn, shaped—important museum exhibitions, installation and display strategies, and related developments in modern design. Through these critical intersections, modern American art became not only visible but highly resonant and relevant when framed and viewed through the doubled lenses of elite and popular culture. *The Modern Eye* makes an important contribution to reclaiming the multiply constituted contexts of American modernism during the transitional decades of the twenties and thirties.

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