ArtReview is an enquiring and intelligent organ. Our readers are accustomed to the bold moves we make, but getting the twentieth century’s most-murderous dictators in a room together must be a global first.
Could we talk about Modernism?

H We all advocated a kind of modernist art. It’s just that ours was the Modernism that lost. Not the good, free-your-head type but the bad, fuck-your-mind-up one (as it came to be regarded).

Stalin

Ours was just as modern as the kind we resisted.

Mao

None of us saw the point of abstraction, as Stalin suggests. We embraced figuration. But this wasn’t a return to a premodern way of seeing things, in which a great depth of human experience can be inferred – even if it isn’t the main content of the work. I mean it would be possible to argue that Rubens’s primary meaning might be reverence for a hateful aristocracy, but there is a great deal else conveyed, just because of the aesthetic richness of his visual expression...

If I may take over Mao’s line at this point, between Rubens and Jackson Pollock there is a continuity of what aesthetes call ‘painterliness’: loose handling and a delight in spontaneous improvisation. But in terms of ideology, well, it’s complicated. Pollock is supposed to be about freedom. I doubt if there’s any visually efficient art that is truly free. But for the sake of argument, let’s take that idea seriously. The art that we dictators ordered into existence was categorically not about that.

Yes, Chinese and Soviet propaganda posters promised freedom through work and education, but that’s different to existential freedom where you’re pursuing individual fulfilment.

Our totalitarian art was a visual bombardment, simple and clear; it told you how existence was going to be from now on. But as Hitler so rightly suggests, if your ideology turns out to be the wrong one, then the art that encapsulates it will be wrong too.

Can you sum up the other kind?

Well, Jackson Pollock gets the viewer to philosophise the structures of how things in art are seen. The viewer is active, not passive, no longer an automaton in society. Exposure to Modernism is sensitising you. It doesn’t have to be a work of Pollock’s finest hour, even with a medium-good one, like Stenographic Figure – from about the time when my troops were either besieging or abandoning Stalingrad, wasn’t it...? In any case, the deal is that the viewing self becomes a self-creator, and the logical corollary is that the whole of society goes through some marvellous dramatic change. I found all that far too woolly: I preferred the side of Modernism that is about certainty. There’s nothing more certain than a swastika or a Nuremberg rally.

Those days are long gone.

WE ALL ADVOCATED A KIND OF MODERNIST ART. IT’S JUST THAT OURS WAS THE MODERNISM THAT LOST

They are, but I’m happy to see that the Hugo Boss company, which used to design my SS uniforms, is involved with financially supporting contemporary art. And I feel my work was not in vain when I see your intellectual art promoters with their minds conditioned by Derrida applauding certain outcomes of postmodernism in art galleries. It’s as if my old methods of genocide and blitzkrieg were but lumbering rehearsals for something far more streamlined. Why imprison artists for exploring meaning and philosophy through new forms when you can just vacuum out their artistic minds instead? And why perform this cleansing by violence, when you can do it through the universities, through intellectuals – those whose actions are determined by the dictates of their conscience?

Yes. Just make the contents of consciousness different, so all sense of conscience is different too. This has certainly come about. Anything crudely understandable as political in art is considered important. Anything requiring familiarity with the history of forms, going back many centuries, is considered airy-fairy and deluded, merely repetitious of a moment that was no more than a CIA plot anyway.

What is striking is that Derrida’s The Truth in Painting and Foucault’s work on Magritte and Velázquez were by no means these authors’ best works, but nevertheless you can tell they weren’t philistines. They were deconstructing, yes...

They were perhaps looking at what Pierre Bourdieu called the social power play behind judgements of taste...

But they weren’t putting all the old hard-won abilities to assess and be delighted by quality on the garbage heap. They did not advocate replacing the delicate mechanisms of taste with mere obedience to new crass laws that dictate what is acceptable and what is not.

It’s a hilarious reversal you have now. The freedom to philosophise is turned into a new variation on Hitler’s fascism or Mao’s and my totalitarian socialism. Instead of automatically believing what is passed down from the Führer or the Party leader, you believe what an art gallery press release says. It orders you what to think and what not to think, but its overriding rationale is commerce: a wealthy elite has invested in arbitrary artistic phenomena far removed from anything that might have been important in the history of art...

Whether Modern or premodern, and regardless of whether it served new bohemian notions of freedom or the power of aristocracy and the Church...

Take Chinese trendy painters. Anyone informed about art can see that the visual level is low. But the sense of content is equally inane. A modern everyman perpetually grinning; a mocking social realism that praises Coca-Cola instead of agriculture; family portraits that supposedly express modern anxiety instead of utopian dreams: all in the same cartoon style, bright and graphic, like posters – an art of laughter that mocks all beliefs. But not profound, like Voltaire laughing at organised religion; instead the boomy ho-ho of the pub bore, like a sign that says, ‘You don’t have to be mad to work here but it helps!’ At best it is the sneering grin of the callow adolescent.
MANY OF OUR ANTAGONISMS ARE WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE. 
AND LET’S FACE IT: WE DO HAVE A CERTAIN AMOUNT IN COMMON. WE ALL HAD A SENSE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VISUAL IN GETTING ACROSS OUR MESSAGE

who calls for revolution, but whose demand for everything to be turned upside down is only the expression of everything at the adolescent stage of the mental psyche feeling like it’s being turned upside down anyway.

Well put, Mao. These forms of clowning take their place in a new artworld mindset of shallow despair. Despair is brought on by helplessness...

Yes, that feeling of impotence that necessarily accompanies capitalist triumph: control over the actions and thoughts of the increasingly dispensable many by the excessively wealthy few. You’ve got to hand it to them. But Hitler and Mao aren’t just pointing to junk created by rising hustlers in parts of the world far away from the former centres of artworld power. We’re talking about the spectacularisation of art, so whether it’s old or new, aesthetic or political – this binary that Jacques Rancière, in his post-Althusserian researches, rightly exposes as illusory – effectively it’s all equally meaningless.

Meaning is summed up in new Chinese stuff by one-liner descriptions, which flatter the sense of resonance and depth that the works actually possess. But because all capacity for judgement, the ability to tell the difference between opportunism and something a bit more worthwhile, have been lost...

And it would seem like the crime of aestheticism mixed with the even worse crime of cultural imperialism to say out loud what everyone who knows about art is thinking, that such art lacks much reason to exist...

Because of all this, you get a sort of mind-blowing new intellectual development where those in charge of the visual side of academia fall over backwards to take Chinese contemporary art jokes seriously.

So you’re saying that the cause of global takeover, which is a new global wealthy elite’s raison d’être, is served by the bowing and scraping occupants of secure positions in visual studies departments in universities, places that used to stand for the free workings of the mind and the operations of reason and philosophy? And of course art magazines tend to imitate crudely or breezily what happens at the refined academic starting point. So all information about art now has this nothing-means-anything-so-there’s-no-point-in-genuinely-thinking-about-it-just-consume-it slant. I suppose as dictators you can only admire the brilliance of this political manoeuvre.

Indeed. I concur with Mao and Hitler. Decades ago I decreed that Moscow subway stops should be ‘palaces for the people’ (complete with marble surfaces, mosaics and chandeliers). This theme of aesthetic greatness being transmuted from the realm of kings and the clergy to that of the people (who must be dominated), but only as a vague approximation, is reiterated by modern art museums. Get them in line by reverencing for sploshy paintings (a tedious fudgeism).

Rather I see that postmodernism is only worth anything if it continues Modernism’s theme of mental exploration. Modernism’s relationship to the past could be argued to be one of reprising that which is worth keeping if your aim is social hope. This can work when considering present-day artists who are shameless geniuses of money. We isolate their element of aesthetic brilliance while discarding whatever happens at the refined academic starting point. So all information about art now has this nothing-means-anything-so-there’s-no-point-in-genuinely-thinking-about-it-just-consume-it slant. I suppose as dictators you can only admire the brilliance of this political manoeuvre.

Yes, and even Versailles follows the lead by putting on shows of Jeff Koons and Murakami.

Well, what I conclude is not that postmodernism deserves only a scream of hatred in favour of reverence for sploshy paintings (a tedious fudgeism).

Murakami.

[THE MURDEROUS DICTATORS ROLL IN THE AISLES, ICE CREAM CARTONS THROWN IN THE AIR, CLUTCHING THEIR SIDES, TEARS FLOWING FROM THEIR EYES.]

Next month

Diderot on the art of the Salon
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