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## **Critical Terms - Modernism 3. Modernism and contemporary art**

WARREN CARTER: I'm Warren Carter. And I'm a lecturer in the History of Art Department with Open University. My research is really concerned with public art in the interwar period in the United States and Mexico. But today, I'm here to talk about the concept of modernism with Paul Wood, who used to be a colleague of mine in the same department.

One of the problems I find in a lot of contemporary writing about contemporary art is that when it talks about modernism, it does so in a very obviously disparaging way. But rather than treat the concept of modernism in a kind of nuanced, sophisticated fashion, which can take on board the complexities that you've been speaking about today, it tends to deal with it as a caricature, as a straw man.

This often stretches back to a figure like Marcel Duchamp and his famous urinal as a kind of iconic moment of anti-art. This led to a counter-tradition, supposedly, within art through the 20th century. I'm thinking of people like Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, who at the same time they're producing works which have the kind of paint of the expressiveness of a Jackson Pollock or de Kooning painting, also again incorporate aspects of the real world, whether this be beer cans, bedspreads, you name it.

If you separate this particular artistic lineage from another one, i.e. modernism, there's a danger of losing all those aspects of that modernist tradition, which at one level, had a certain oppositional relationship to the general world as well.

PAUL WOOD: I think there's not much question that there's a certain stereotype of modernism, which is seen as a thing of the past. It's seen as something which contemporary art has, as it were, escaped from, that modernism is seen as... well, it's often seen as elitist, for example.

I think what I'm trying to say is something rather different - that this attempt to engage with wider forms of modernity has been present throughout the wider modern period. And I do think it's a kind of mistake to think that we are, so to speak, no longer modern, that we are in a different kind of condition. I think we are certainly in a different phase of modernity since the end of the Cold War, globalisation, those kinds of things. We live in a world which is very different from the world I grew up in in the second half of the 20th century, let alone the early 20th century and the late 19th century.

But these tend to be, I would want to say, phases of modernity. Now, one of the charges which is often levelled against modernism in its stereotypical form is that it was a kind of symptom of this modernity which is now past, which is, in turn, identified with all kinds of negatives like eurocentrism or patriarchy or something like that. So modernism is seen as a creature of a set of negative social attributes, which we are now seen as having gone beyond.

I'm not sure that that really is the best way of looking at the various kinds of developments. We certainly, I don't think, are out of various kinds of contradictions. You've only got to look at the kind of social crises of the last 20 years. We still have to address modernity in all its forms. I don't think that contemporary art escapes from that.

What you can say is that certain forms of contemporary art do have roots back into that avant-garde tradition. And a lot of contemporary art, with its threads going back into the middle of the 20th century - figures like Rauschenberg that you mention, Andy Warhol - relating back to earlier avant-gardes like the surrealists or the constructivists, they have done that similar kind of thing - that they've seen art as very context-dependent, rather than pursuing more self-referential kind of features of art making.

And so the ones always tended to exclude the others somehow. In fact, they tend to be involved together in a historical period, that you've got different approaches to different things, different emphases. I don't think an artist like Jackson Pollock, who's about as abstract as you can get, ever really turned his back on the modern world. And if you don't somehow address those complexities and peculiarities and difficulties, then it's not modernism that you're dealing with. It's a sort of stereotype or a caricature of modernism.

WARREN CARTER: So the avant-garde tradition doesn't happen in a vacuum, like you say. In fact, it's dependent upon formal devices, particular strategies, tropes that have been worked out within what is now read as a modernist practice. The two things are kind of interdependent, and to separate them is wrong. It doesn't work.

PAUL WOOD: The relationship of the present to the past, the relationship of Europe to a wider world - all these kinds of things have been stalking the art of the whole modern period. And I don't think that the contemporary situation is any different. It's still the matter of trying to find - whether you're an historian or a critic or an artist - you're trying to find ways of representing the situation that you're in, when really, many factors in the situation don't really want you to be able to represent critically the world that you're in. It's about sort of various kinds of distraction and not addressing the situation that you're in.

WARREN CARTER: So what you're saying is that, despite the supposed end of history thesis, despite the contemporary moment of globalisation, etc., some of the key issues that were involved in the production of modern art haunt us even now. So the idea that we can somehow separate a contemporary moment and bracket it off from a kind of modernist tradition is basically a non-starter, or it's not that valuable.

PAUL WOOD: I think it's absolutely vital. I think that you can still continue to learn from the past. At the same time as the reason for learning from the past shouldn't be learning about it for

its own sake, it has to be addressed to the present. It's the old Bertolt Brecht thing about looking at the bad new days not the good old days.

WARREN CARTER: Yeah. Brilliant. OK. Thank you very much, Paul.