

Defining Modernism: Towards a Definition of Postmodernism

MODERNISM (1850 – 1950)

Focus on the (aesthetic) experience
of modernity (industrialization/urbanization)
in terms of being ephemeral/fugitive/contingent

Distance vis à vis the negative effects of
modernity e.g. mass culture & kitsch

Against “cultural overweight“endowed by history
(eg. ornamentation), “return“ to basic forms

moral attitude or style / avantgarde – self critical

Two Modernisms developed from ca. 1850-1950:

Modernism 1. Formalism- Ability of Art to be about itself. For example, painting is about paint and its flat surface.

Painting is not about illusionism but about fending off illusionism and naturalism through abstraction. Ability of art to be self-critical and self-conscious so as not to subvert each medium (painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, video, architecture, etc.- the work's material and technique(s) used) but rather to entrench each medium more firmly in its area of expertise. Maintains humanist assumptions inherited from the Renaissance that find value in authorship, stable subjectivity, originality, uniqueness.

Art as Pure Vision, Art as Pure Form. Formalist works celebrate the objecthood of art.

Exemplar Modernist and Formalist Artists:

- Pablo Picasso

- Painter Jackson Pollock, in the context of him as an Abstract Expressionist painter

Two Modernisms developed from ca. 1850-1950: Modernism and Conceptualism

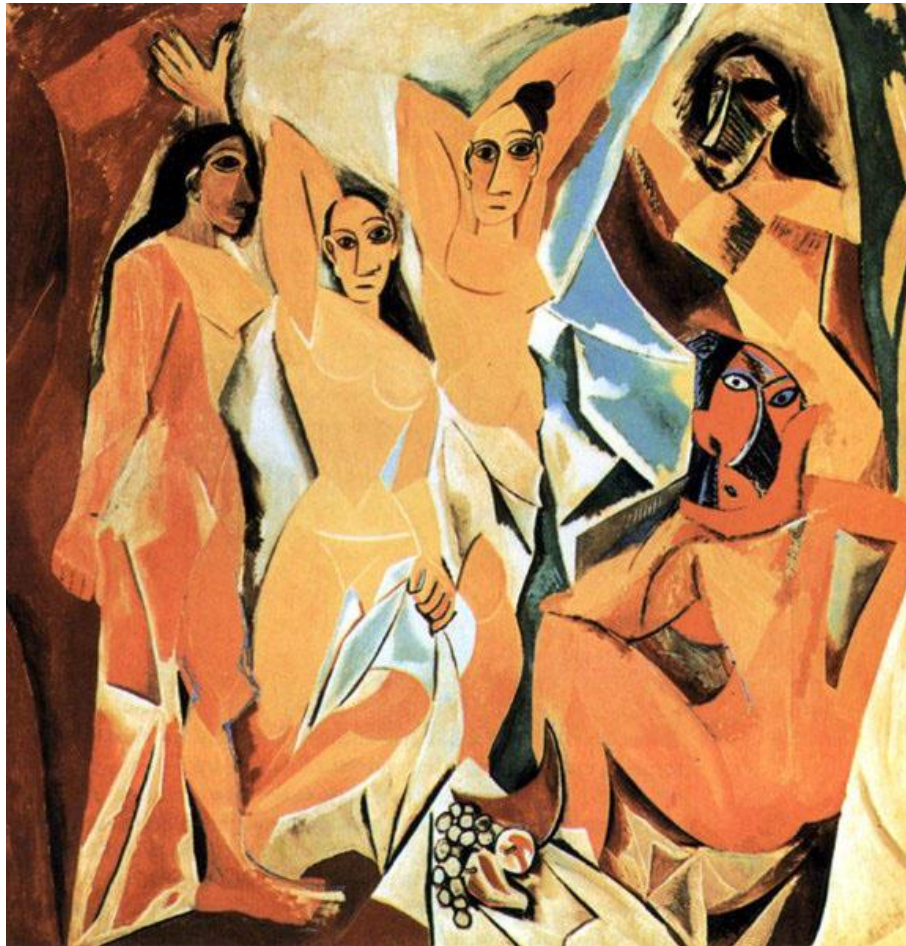
Postmodernism is a movement that developed after modernism, after 1950, and in response to modernism; it seems to respond to and continue the conceptualist strain of Duchamp and challenge and critique to more dominant, formalist strain of modernism

Post- means

after, in response to

Postmodernism is

after, in response to modernism and is necessarily about modernism



Standard label for works of art:

Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907, oil on canvas, Cubism, Modernism

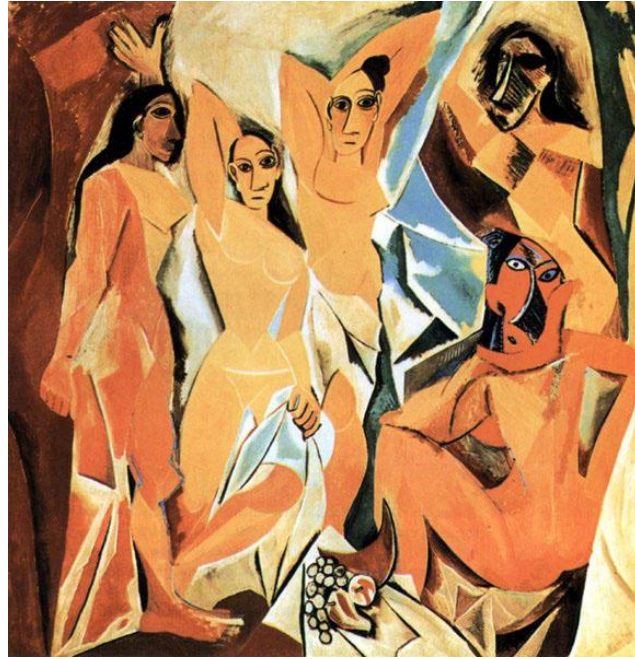
Artist: Picasso

Title: *Les Femmes d'Alger*

Year painted: 1907

Medium: oil on canvas

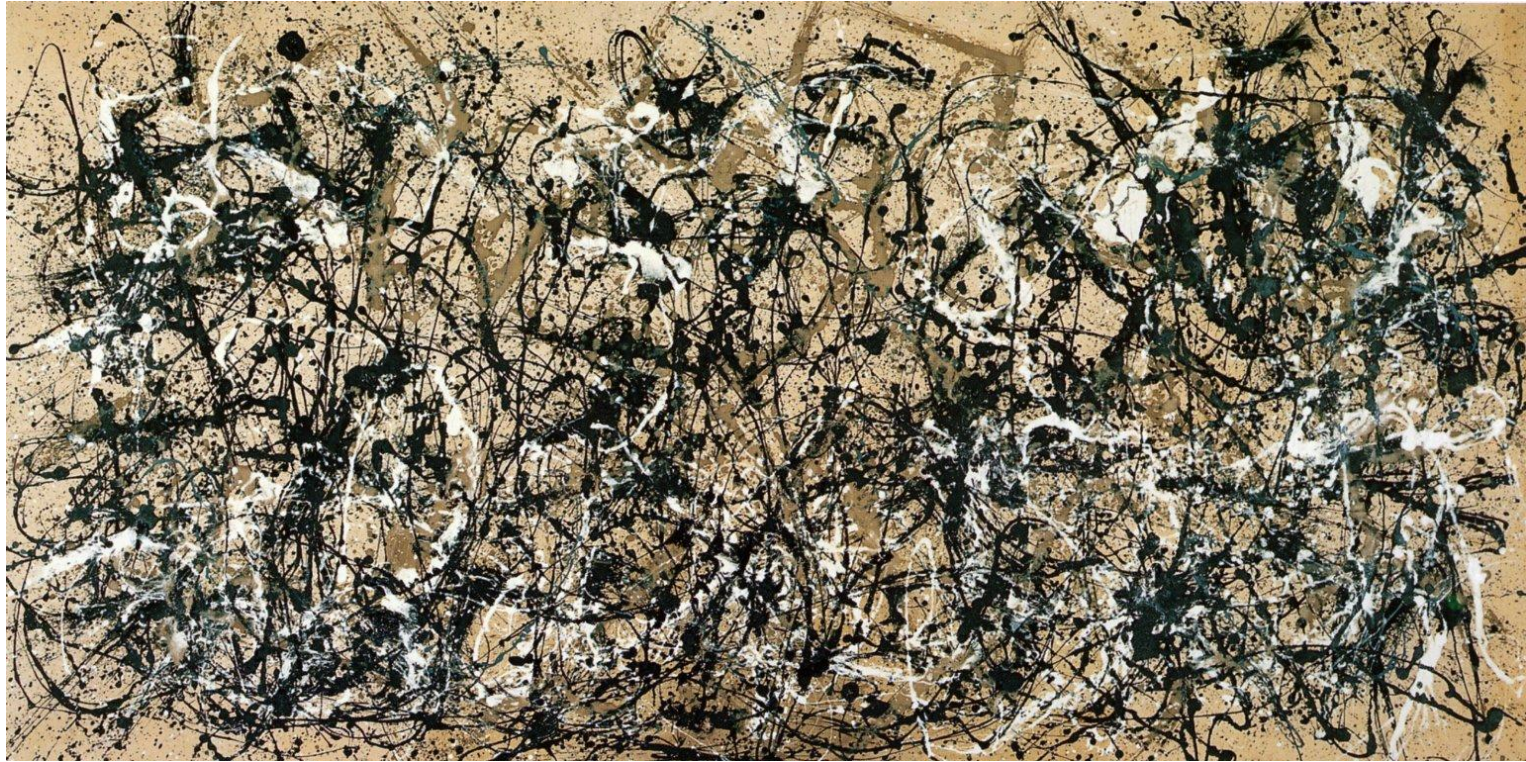
Movement(s): Cubism, Modernism



CUBISM-

Movement that looked to and borrowed the formal directness and simplicity of African art; European artists reacted to the pure form of African masks and only appropriated formal meaning, not cultural or historical meanings

Jackson Pollock and Formalism



Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, oil on canvas, Abstract Expressionism, Modernism

Abstract Expressionism- a formalist modernist painting movement- is the culmination of the expressive tendencies in painting from Van Gogh through Fauvism and German Expressionism; after World War II, artists were increasingly exploring visual realms other than the representational and narrative.

Pollock was the artist who best exemplified the movement Abstract Expressionism, an abstract style also termed “gestural painting.”

Abstract Expressionism, as it manifest in New York City and also known as the “New York School Painting,” emphasized the material of paint and the process of painting in styles that were both stylistically innovative and personal; it became the dominant style, the most popular and preferred kind of painting, and made New York City the center of the international art world.

Modernism 2. Conceptualism- Ability of Art to be "postmedium," to be about ideas, to still be self-referential but not so as to address its own medium but to address its own condition as a materially and contextually defined object.

Ability to either discard or engage beyond the enframed static painting or the spatially detached sculpture, engage beyond a critique of its medium and celebration of its objecthood in order to understand, interact with, and lay bare the contexts of the work and the conditions of its production.

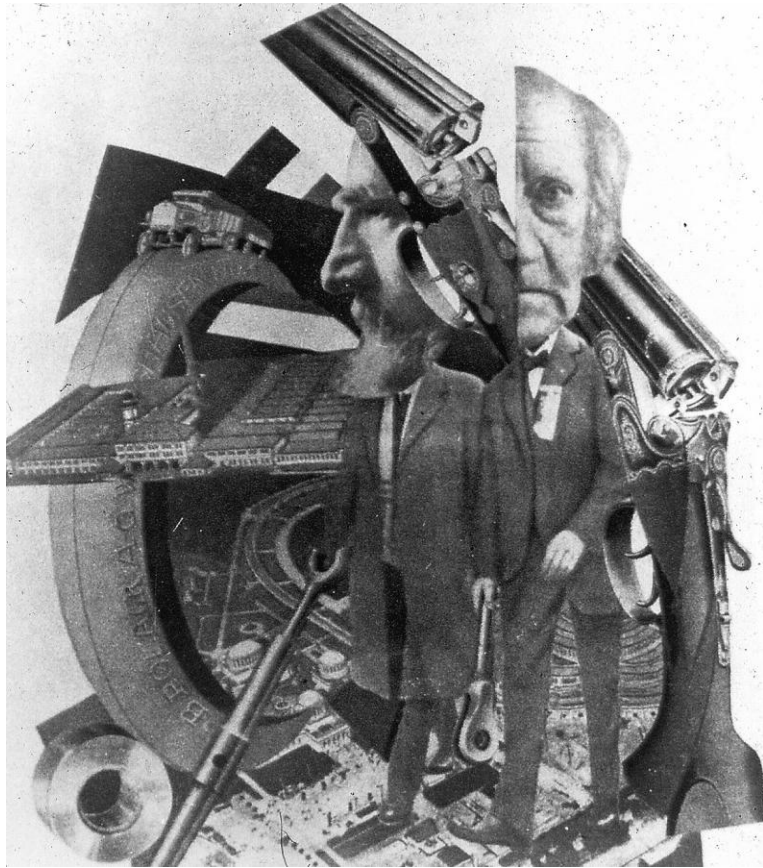
Exemplar Early Conceptualist Modernist Artists:

Marcel Duchamp

Other "Dada"ists- Hannah Höch

Jackson Pollock, in the specific context of him as an "action painter"

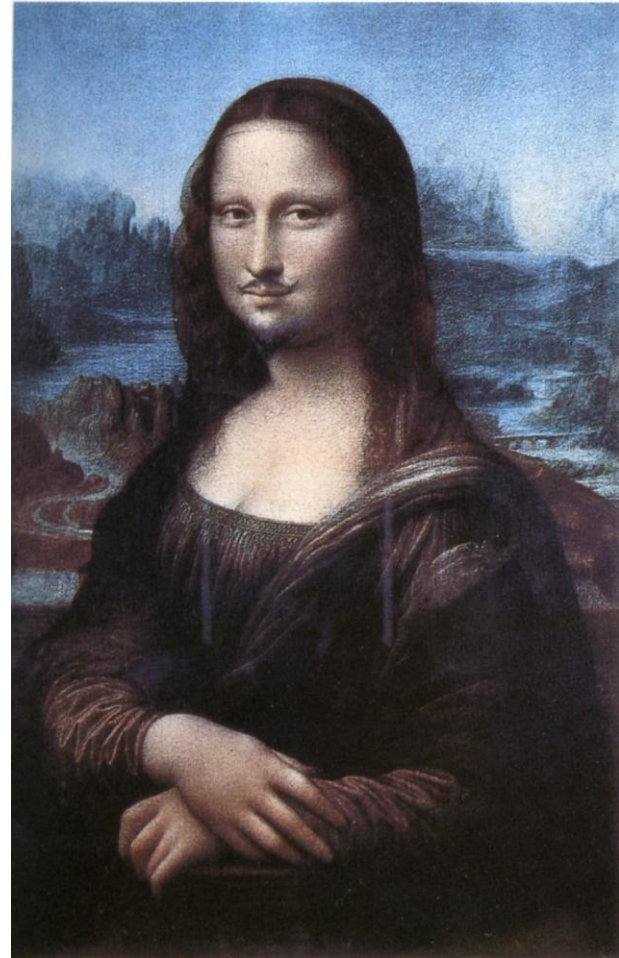
Dada Movement = international movement initiated by young writers and artists began in protest against the horrors of World War I (1914-1918) as an assault on corrupt values; the absurd word Dada expressed the destructive absurdity of war caused by values of the old order, routine and traditional narrow-minded values; Dada is a reaction against the “logic” of bourgeois / capitalist / militarist society.



Hannah Höch, *Multi-Millionaire*, 1923, photomontage, Dada, Modernism (conceptual strain); word “collage” from French colle: to glue / photomontage is a collage of photographs



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, Dada, Modernism (conceptual strain), “assisted readymade”- found, utilitarian object that the artist transforms



Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, pencil on reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Dada, Modernism (conceptual strain), “assisted readymade”

Jackson Pollock and Conceptualism



Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, 1950, oil on canvas, Modernism, Abstract Expressionism



Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock*, 1950, depicts his action painting, photograph

“Conceptual” Process based and Performance Art-

Challenges art-as-object

process of artwork more important than product; artists perform actions before an audience or in nature containing visual elements but also drama and it urges interactivity-

has historical antecedents in: Dada performances from the early 20th c. and;

Abstract Expressionist painting, specifically the “action painting” style of Pollock- his painting *Autumn Rhythm* is the frozen record of the event that the photographer Hans Namuth captured. The next step, in the eyes of performance artists, was easy: eliminate the record and concentrate on the event itself and its requisite interactivity, its need for an audience to complete the work-

Postmodernist interpretation of Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm*-

some art critic-historians and artists challenge the strict modernist categorization of Pollock’s “action painting” citing Hans Namuth’s photos and films of Pollock working as equally important to Pollock’s products and citing the process-based, performative nature of Pollock’s practice.