

All that is solid melts into air:

About a theory

In regards to the exhibition Cubism and Abstract Art at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in 1936, the American art historian Alfred H. Barr published a chart, which purpose was to “expose” the modern art. The chart was a diagram of artists and movements, all arranged on a timeline, with a number of arrows and cross-references, ranging from the 1890s until 1935.

The minute attempt shows a desire to identify art and the belief that this is possible, and a willingness to explain and preserve the many modern art trends for the future. Almost like a schematic, from which artists can go and elicit new and unused stylistic combinations. (As a possible explanation for this almost scientific systematization, it may be noted that Barr in his adolescence made a similar scientific measure concerning his butterfly collection.)

Unlike many modernistically oriented analysts, the American socio-cultural analyst Marshall Berman (born 1940), stated in 1982, that nothing is permanent, not even The Modern Project, as was suggestively defined and codified by art analysts such as Barr. Unlike Barr - who won't let political or social upheaval affect his scientific effort to understand the development of modern art - Berman points out the importance of seeing society and culture as a whole. Art can not be limited to some autonomous, segregated world within the world. Art has never arisen from a vacuum. For Berman literature, art, music, urban planning, poverty, theater etc., exist side by side, like links in the overall structure that falls under the intricate concept of ‘culture’.

What Berman means by modernity and modern mentality, is a matter of awareness of politics, social structures, and art, rather than a recognizable stylistic artistic expression. To converge his thoughts under one banner, Berman borrows a phrase from Karl Marx, a phrase that becomes the title of Berman's own modern manifesto: All that is solid melts into air.

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world - and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are... To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air”.

Works of art, architectural trends, political decisions etc., inevitably affects our consciousness, whether or not we are consciously aware of the cultural impact.

When Marshall Berman published his book *All that is solid melts into air: The Experience of Modernity*, it differed from many of the contemporary cultural theories. In 1982 the postmodern cultural diagnoses flourished. This was the time one could assert the breakdown of the Grand Narrative. A time where one could reject the modernist understanding of history, with its optimistic anticipation of the future, and dismiss such structures as the result of an illusion.

Such points of view does not surprise the modernist Berman, as he sees this development as an element of resignation. He points out that many avowed postmodern theorists are so caught up in their repudiation of the modern project, that the discussion is doomed to pessimism. Berman emphasizes that it is not only the loss of the old (meaning that which was once was considered modern), that is essential to cultural analysis, but also how postmodern theorists make use of historical explanations to analyze current cultural phenomena. In that sense, postmodernism according to Berman, is merely the progeny of the modern project. The modern is, in spite of the so-called postmodern drive, entrenched in contemporary art and culture, and can't be reduced to a form (cf. Alfred H. Barr), or discarded as a closed chapter. For Berman, the modern project is melted into our consciousness.

*All that is solid melts into air: About an exhibition* At first glance it may seem as if the exhibition ‘Take Away’ just examines the lost. The castings of broken bowls and abandoned mugs can, without difficulty, be tied to something bygone. Immediately, it might also seem as though the title of the exhibition invites us to reflect over trivial everyday notions: A party hall, belonging to the past, is turn inside-out into a take-away adoration. Although the use of materials - plastic castings - seems to confirm that the predominant use of precious porcelain in times past, now has been replaced by plastic. But this is no sentimental show, where the mentality of our time and our practices are portrayed as cold and impersonal. Rather, it seems to occupy a middle ground, as an invitation to reflection.

This only represents the immediate impression of the exhibition's top layer. It does not seem to be judgmental of what our present has lost or abandoned. In such a case the works of art would have been reduced to regressive expressions, inviting the visitor into a place of pessimism, where concepts like humor and confidence in the future, would act only as an echo from the past. There lies a potent duality in the exhibition, and its title 'Take Away'.

As is the case with Berman's analysis of modernity, so does the modern culture in this exhibition consist of multiple layers, gathered under this loose notion, which Berman characterizes as "(...) a Paradoxical unity; A unity of disunity": The public character of the take-away concept is fused into a domestic social practice. Artistic value is added to the otherwise worthless consumer products, and they are presented as valuable. The title of the exhibition is similarly multi-faceted: Does 'take away' denote a lost mentality, something that is taken away, or removed from our culture? Perhaps 'take away' commentates the literal artistic practice of removing the plastic castings from the forms they are supposed to emulate? Does 'take away' allude the widespread demand for mobility in our time? Here we are - without instruction - located in an intermediate position.

The hollow vacuum-formed plastic, and the photographs including abandoned plastic carousels, express something, and they are expressive of something, but it is unclear whether we are talking about longing, ridicule, sentimentality, or harsh social criticism. Should one reflect on the loss of cultural convention, while this material's presence in culture is derided as an empty substitute, or is this the humorous commenting of conservative practices, through the use and application of such a material? Berman's claim, that art can never be understood in a vacuum without cultural awareness, is brought up to date in these many vacuum casts.

He borrows the phrase "All that is solid melts into air" from Karl Marx, just to illustrate an attitude to how significantly artistic expressions can contribute to our awareness of the changing cultural climate that surrounds us. The works we are confronted by in 'Take Away', can therefore be understood as such awareness-building reminders. It is, after all, only the visitor's reflection that can lift the molds out of the notion that plastic and take away culture are symptoms of the deterioration of modern convenience.