

The Artist and the Model: The Work of Jon Arne Mogstad

by Steve Dixon

I

The splash of paint. The motion of the artist moving through the repertoire of the painting object. Referring to itself. The stroke of paint and its consistencies, properties. and the interactions and devices used. Lingering filaments of the paint brush, the seepage of oils, the sparseness of the hard bristle and the hesitating approach to the white canvas or the already laid colors. Or the richness of the no-holds-bared application of dense paint. The push-pull of the colors and depth of the paint working amongst themselves. An oval of paint covering an swipe of another attack of the brush and color. The hidden motions of color, paint and the action of the artist. Not hidden though. They exist only as they are. On the surface of the field they are only what they are. One set of rules calling us to read them as the Given of the work. Jon Arne Mogstads Movements. His treatment of color. His concerns with the whole and the unrevealed in the motion of surface and paint. The interaction of colors and form slipping and moving in his attack and our approach. One set of rules, One language calling us to enclose it and read it here. Here the Mark is the Mark. The color is the Color. The Motion is the Motion. Enclosed in the Dream of totality and self-evidentness. What you see being just that--What you see.

1

It is arguably with Greenberg that the end-move of modernism was begun in the art world; and with the minimalists that it was to come to its completion. In the formulation of the high modernism of art practice, and the theoretical elaboration's of it's practice and objects, the greenbergian approach was an appeal to the *actual* materials of art as a self-reflexive foundation for art itself. Meanings and materials were to merge into one. This self-referential foundation was to be achieved in the greenbergian system by the removal of all extraneous meanings which could be attached to the art object (1). Jettisoning the superficial concepts which became attached to art and its subject the greenbergian view called for a "return" to the purely enclosed and the unmistakably real of the art object. The materials, the gestures, and the body of the artist (and the trace left by the interaction of these materials and the artist) were to become the building blocks for any and all of the meanings generated by an artistic work. This set of meanings was seen as being completely *true* inside of the formal premises of the object and, with it, the artistic language comprising the work.

With the minimalist this reduction came to be carried even further. The focus on the art object came to be shifted away from its *matterness* (along with the all of the unnecessary external meanings which may carry a hidden value of expressiveness related to the materials) to the most basic level in the foundation -- the primary and fundamental forms. This shift was to gather together the fundamental building blocks necessary to be used as a foundation and logically complete set of basic ideas which could then be combined, separated, etc.; to create a generative system for artistic grammars and, therefore, texts and objects. Because of it's thoroughgoing elaboration of a set of basic forms, this generative level was to yield a definite and irrefutable foundation for a consistent artistic grammar as well as a real connection to the fundamentals of an artistic and art language. Minimalism attempted to reduce the forms of art, and the theoretical basis of art practice, to the most basic and elemental components, and use these as the foundation for a elaboration of a essential and ideal artistic grammar.

In brief, the greenbergian notion stated that the iconic nature (2) of the material sign could directly reflect reality by it's indications of the cause of the painting, i.e. the gesture of the artist and the reality of the properties of the medium, showing us where our languages and reality coincide. While the

minimalists wished to shift the focus from the materials to the forms to create a language which was directly founded on this reality and avoiding the messiness of leftover and ambiguous links to the world. This was to be the completion of the modernist project inaugurated by the Cartesian "clear and distinct ideas", the separation of primary and secondary qualities, and rounded out in the Russellian attempt at a symbolic language which our "incomplete and vague languages" could be translated into in order to achieve a complete linguistic clarity between word and object.

II

The splash of paint however harbors a doubt. Mogstad beacons us onward. The push and pull of the paint on his surface, the incompleteness of the stroke beneath the other- readings begin to move onward. the self-enclosed shimmers and vanishes on the surface. We read a mark as continuing. Something exists, the splash of paint may not be seen but we continue on. We do see it there - where ,in fact, it is not seeable. We read one plane of the paint as closer to us, not merely on the surface. As well as one beneath, further from us. Jon Arne Mogstad sets before us the conundrum-what you see is more than what you see.

And laying next to this mark, this grammar of the mark, lays something else. We find a bare black and white roof-top, or a simple country road presented to us. Inexactly seen it implies an snapshot, a moment captured to call up some memory or a playful instance between two people to highlight a intimate second. The language of the snapshot juxtaposed to the language of the paint mark. Each with their own site and set of rules for our consideration. Paint calling our attention to the museum, the photo to our everyday. Yet each of these, Mogsad points out, represents something. A language is a place where we live. And where we decide to live, which of these we think of as being there, where we are, shifts continually upon the surface of ourselves. Each panel of Mogstads work calls up a hierarchy, a home, a self-reading. A place we decide to stop and say this is us.

2

The problem which haunted the modernist approach, however, is neatly summed up by Barthes when he states:

".....denotation is not the first sense, but pretends to be; under this illusion, it is ultimately only the last of connotations (that which seems at one to found and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, the language of nature." (3)

In a thoroughgoing way, for the postmodernist, there can be no denotative possibilities. There is no, nor can there be, any way the word (or art concept) can relate directly to the world. It is only the connotative or metaphoric links which are examined in the grammars, texts or objects of art (or languages). Contact with the *world* is, in and of itself, an impossibility. Yet, even with such a severing of art, the word, and us from the *world*, art and its practice is still possible, even necessary, in order to carry out a *critical analysis of representational systems* themselves. This is because representational systems both house and obscure the reluctance and unworkability of language to reveal the *world*. The analysis of representational systems (or, in fact, a synthetic approach in the postmodern) is meant to both excavate the hidden meanings and movements of apparently transparent concepts in our languages (that is those which seem to be self-evident) and show how these meanings are harbored and generated inside of specific metaphoric and ideological constructs or locales. These metaphoric locales are the places in a society; called disciplines, jobs, positions, professions, trades, etc.(4); which have their own set of specific languages, rules for the "good" usage of that language (grammar) and beliefs about good "fits" with the

world and these languages and grammars. Within these locales it is the generally accepted stoppages in the metaphoric links which are the defining factors to the "meanings" seen as "true" by the discipline or occupation. The beginnings of a post-modernist approach coincides with this concern that the endeavor of any analytic or synthetic theoretical apparatus (and this includes the movements within art theory and practice, as well as philosophy) focus on the *examination of the representational systems*, and the locales of these metaphoric structures. Because each of these metaphoric locales are defined by the accepted stoppages in the connotative links (i.e. the "denotations"), which create meanings specific to the locale, knowledge systems cannot be the totalities which the languages at these sites "naturally" imply. There can only be fragments of a system as each metaphoric pathway is enclosed in its own set of concerns. Materials, or even abstracted forms, are nothing more in this view, than the predecided sum of metaphors about these forms and materials, and the representational and linguistic bearers of the metaphors circulating around them; including the hidden and implied meanings these metaphors hold within themselves. They bear, nor can they, no more weight than the metaphoric structures decided upon within any specific locale or discipline. It is with this in mind Derrida notes that "words may only speak with other words". The use of any language is only a "deferral"(5), as he calls it, of speaking about the world. A deferral which can never be bridged and can only perpetuate itself through-out all textual and grammatical systems.

Almost all of the thinkers who have had such a impact on the postmodernist trajectory have concluded, moving along this line of thought, that the languages which we utilize in the explication of the metaphoric locale, and the combinations accepted there, are a form of "prison house" of thought. We are "born into a language"(6) and it is there that we remain, as Lacan says. And with such constraints the possibility of a critique of the positions within a metaphoric structure are effectively severed. As Foucault puts the case, any critique of the system, which is formulated from the circulations and articulations of power and from there into a language system, is, of itself, also based in these positions of power (7). Any such critique is as flawed as the position(s) it therefore attempts to critique.

III

Enclosed in a world of meanings the bare roof-tops speaking of an architecture placed before us. Unmovable in its apparentness. A landscape imprinted on the surface of a world which we can read but not touch. The push and pull of the paint-stroke lodged in the white walls of the museum of history. Mogstads work calls up these meanings and lays them side by side before us. How to read each then. The system of one pushing up in its value to us. We see the photo almost unframed by its snapshot character. The blurriness highlighting its off-handedness. The enlargement moving it further from us, but now back to us as we recall the jitter of our own hands as we have taken similar pictures at a birthday party, on a vacation. It moves upward in the hierarchy of our reading. Call out for our consideration. Linger here it says. And the paint mark - it to says to us stay here a while. My richness and form. The long history of your culture struggling and accomplishing. High art and white walls.

The hierarchy breaks, shifts. Mogstads presentation keeps moving the Jacob ladder of ascent. What is important in our reading and the pathway we take to get there shifts, realigns. We must begin again we say. Read it this way. But now again we are ask to back track. Start from the beginning, but not from the same place. Until we come to one of Mogstads points in this work. Hold all of these differing hierarchies, pathways and conclusions together in your reading. Hold them all together and at the same time.

Naturally, this concept of the enfolding of language and its users has been spoken of often since the inception of the postmodernist reply to modernism. But what hasn't been noted in the debate produced around this question is that the movement to alleviate this concern has focused, in the postmodern, on creating interrelated structures and meanings, through the use of languages, grammars, and the juxtaposition of these, which *problematized the coherence of a locale* itself. The effect being that a concern with *problems* (as in modernism) has been moved away from to one of *problematization*.

Within the modernist project, because the world is theoretically possible to "reach", the concern with languages, texts and grammars (or, as we have been talking about it, all of the metaphors thought necessary to give satisfactory conditions within the locale) was to correct the technical, mechanical or theoretical problems in order to find more effective "fits" with the *world*. Problems are seen as marginal components which, once the deficiencies in the construct are solved, are integrated into the metaphorically normative (working) interior. If all the conditions are met, that is all of the problems of the system (or locale) are solved; then all linguistic statements will be defined and separable into three basic categories: *sense* (those which connect with the world), *senseless* (those which have no referent in the world, but may be logically necessary, i.e. tautologies) and *nonsense* (not connected to the world and logically impossible) (8). The postmodernist, however, considers the *problems* to be intrinsic to the operations of every language system. The "deferral" of the signifier means that "between every signifier and signified (word and object) is *nowhere*" (9). This nowhere is where all language users must reside (10). The problems which any theoretical construct has (as well as any ordinary or everyday speech utterance) is intrinsic to it and the system it resides in (11). *Problems lie not outside of the system but are one of the functions of the apparatus of language itself*. The system cannot be divided into the categories of inside and outside in any sense. No Avant-garde can have validity within this system. Margins exist only within and the outside resides in the center.

Two points come to the fore given these concerns, and ones which express themselves in a general dissatisfaction being felt at the moment in regard to the postmodernist endeavor. Given the placement of the individual in the hanging and vague position between the signified and signifier, and with the idea of the enfolding of a language, the individual is eradicated in some sense, in favor of the social. The social is where resides the creation and definition of all languages and their meanings (12), and the hidden agendas of the language systems which generate and reinforce these meanings. The social body, into which we are born, is both the creator and determiner of meanings and values and, in its turn, the individual (13).

Taking this we can see that because all languages are determined before hand and that all words speak only to other words (deferral) the conclusion that the postmodernist comes to is that all experience of the individual is *mediated*. That is, we have no way to reach anything but the language we are born into. Therefore, as we can only talk using the language and representational system given to us, we can only reiterate that which is already built into the system (14). And, as everything, is a language (or as the postmodernist would say - A Text), from the landscape to the novel, we are constrained in our interpretations to a preselected and predetermined number of readings. In both the historical sense (what time we live at) and in what culture we live (where we live).

For the postmodern this is why there can be no Avant-Garde nor originality. As language is set before, and within us, we can merely work through the set of paths set out in our language. There is no progress because every place that we go in the system is fundamentally laid out by the languages enclosing us. There is no outside, and even speaking of it is like speaking of what laid outside of the Celestial sphere of Ptolemy and Aristotle. There is merely no such place.

Further, just as the concept of outside is a confused residue of our thought, the individual does not exist in a real sense. At most we can talk of the locus of a language. At the least the nowhere of Derrida. The mediated is complete and inescapable to the postmodernist.

And yet it is not merely the single site of reading. First we use one set of readings (the oval of paint, the delicate stroke of a brush) and then another (the unprofessional handling of an instamatic camera). The hierarchy of a single reading shifting and assolating back and forth. Now, says Jon Arne Mogstad, we collide the systems together. They exist on the same field and draw meanings from one another. Hierarchies do not simply flip-flop here. We jump from one representation to another. How we read, we see, moves across the field of each before we complete the ascent. Mogstad places a long set of ladders side by side. In mid-ascent we decide on another and cross over. Carrying with us a lingering reading from the last. Pathways criss-crossing we use the other as a beginning. A new pathway is born before us. Bred of both, and not either. Not only do hierarchies realign themselves on the surface of the work, but Mogstad shows us how the overlap and interference, the intersections and collisions change even our midpoints of a reading. A new idea springs forth, and is possible to Mogstad, across the field of images and ideas, as well as from within.

4

The "contemporary" response to the postmodernist dilemma has been to reread the monolithic interpretation of the social and linguistic and to reappropriate the plethora of metaphoric structures which define, and also delimit, languages and how meanings are constructed. The construction of meanings is a compound and function of the metaphors which are decided on, and accepted as correct, at a specific cultural locale. This set of metaphors will be the model by which a language is formed at a locale and how that language connect with the *world*. Yet, as each locale in a society will have, and use, different metaphors to define what it is and the concerns it has, the conditions for what will be a good meaning will inevitably vary from locale to locale. The grammars and languages generated from metaphors or models will be specific to a locale and be considered intrinsic to what each is. In other words the metaphors and languages of any locale in a society will be how that locale defines itself.

However, as the circulation of metaphors must in their workings *cross over the boundaries of other locales*, the grammars and languages (which will be utilized for a discussion *accurate* models) need *not be exclusive, nor be seen as exclusive, to that locale*.

Simply put, the monolithic consideration of language, will be repudiated by the complex circulations, leaps, and definitions of metaphors and their languages.

In mild cases this will mean that a metaphoric in one locale in a society will be seen as having some "good fit" with the *world*. A locale may accept the metaphors and grammars of another site to give some further meaning to an idea they hold at their own location while, simultaneously, thinking the other locale has a "bad fit" with the world (i.e. biology thinks it understands "bodies" better than theology, but biologists may still call upon it in euthanasia discussions).

In the more disruptive cases, a set of metaphors from one locale in a society (through its irruption, accidental intersection, collision, etc.) will be integrated into another location in a society. This integration of a new metaphor will cause an alteration of the languages, and a resultant redefining of appropriate texts and discourses seen as true to that locale. The metaphors which are seen as valid by the viewing locale will undergo, in this example, an alteration to incorporate "insights" from the viewed locale. This is seen quite easily in structures like science when two or more discourses come to be integrated (i.e. molecular biology), but is not limited to them only and occurs throughout the constructs of a culture (i.e. racism and I.Q. testing).

Mogstad makes the point here. Each square of work, and each juxtaposition of these "frames", may house a different representational system, but we can use these metaphors amongst themselves. We can reapply the system from one to the other. We as viewers become a co-creator of meaning. Meanings are construct - but we, standing here with Mogstad, contribute to this construction. We are not locked into place with these languages, not nowhere in the system, but moving across the meanings we leap to new places, new forms, new ideas. How we build one site, the raw seepage of paint, the short application of the brush and its total self-reference can be drawn along with us to the lonely contemplation from an attic window. The metaphors informing one now come to inform the other. A new site of reading and of consideration. The images appropriated by Mogstad become, now, appropriated to our reading and applied by us. We follow the pathways of reading laid out and in a single and same movement are pointed to the fullness of the possibilities in our ascent, or, now, our descent.

The fullness of the Mogstad work comes to point us directions of reading which draw us along with him in a excitement of meanings and thier production. The work becomes a field played on by the viewre in the somewhere of it's construction and meaning.

5

However our discussion of the modernist and postmodernist feeds on an implicit conception of the structure of metaphoric poles. And one which was utilized, but veiled, in both modernist and postmodernist discourses, but seems to be utilized quite directly by the contemporary art practitioner. Where the monolithic interpretation of language, or the word/object correlation, reads the linguistic field singularly, our discussion implies two fields as in operation. The first is the internal metaphors powering the texts and grammars of a specific locale and what the site takes as "meaningful" in this regard. We can call this the *vertical field of meanings*. The second is the *horizontal field of meanings*. That is, the entirety of meanings and metaphors which compose a cultural or society. Between these two fields cross-discourses are possible and inevitable. The cross-collision of meanings between the horizontal and vertical determines the structure of possible meanings in the intermediate "gray area". This "gray" area will be where metaphors internal to a discipline, profession, etc. come into contact with different metaphoric spheres, and their speech genres. But this area is saturated with a plethora of alternative meaning systems made possible by the interaction of these two fields. Because of this, whereas the modernist conceives the *problems* of a system, and the postmodernist defines fields to *problematize* the system, the contemporary art practitioner comes to utilize the *problematics* of the created hierarchy of alternative metaphors and meanings. That is; where the modernist, working within a horizontal meaning, sees *problems* with the system and the postmodernist, working within vertical meanings, places these metaphors in collision with one another to *problematize* the system; the "new practitioners" move in the *problematics* of the intermediate arena where hierarchies both exist and collapse in the complex and crossing circulation of metaphors, texts and grammars. The *problematics* is founded on the contrary movement of hierarchies created in this intermediate field and how these same hierarchies cannot satisfy all possible conditions of the jointly accepted metaphoric fields of a society. In such an intermediate sphere neither languages nor its possibilities can defined in regard to closure, but can, due to the recreation of metaphors on the field, be determined as a position and determinate structure on that field. A position, and its resultant hierarchy, accepted as a product and production of the continual (re)generation of metaphors on the field of the intermediate. A place where values are possible to form while holding within themselves the joy of the enigma of this province of transition.

As such an intermediate zone exists, where meanings can be created and recast outside of vertical and horizontal meanings, the stoppage of denotative possibilities need not be ascertained in such a definitive fashion as the postmodernist asserts. Even if the stoppages on the denotative chain are specific to locales, and the speech genres located there this does not discount the idea that interaction between these locales can occur. In other words, the limiting of possibilities by a type of speech and its metaphoric locale is neither intrinsic nor necessary to the operation of any site in a society. The sheer number of metaphors, sites, as well as the poles of vertical and horizontal meanings, insures that the closure of the meaning

operates in a hierarchical structure which is, *per se*, continually compromised. The gaze of the postmodernist at the stoppages in a metaphoric site melts away in the glance of the contemporary practitioner in the vast vistas of the constant circulations and crossings of metaphors. And how these circulations are housed in the delicate balance of a new art practice.

VI

Mogstads new work, then, becomes a call. And a site. The call for us to work through those meanings which have been placed before us and a call to explore, through the conjunction of meanings, how we may replace ourselves in the nexus of meaning itself. A call to reaffirm the somewhere of the construction of meanings. And a site we may do it in.

6

The contemporary art practitioner feels here, within the proliferation of possible metaphors and their circulations within a society, lies the tools to construct a discourse in distinction to the locales of the society and yet, in the same movement, within a society. The art work, its practice, and its theoretical explication, becomes a nested locus in the myriad junctions of complimentary and conflicting metaphors. Drawing lines of interest, force, connection and conflict through metaphors and their hierarchies. The construction and elaboration of these positions, confirmations, contradictions, and their internal circulations, becomes a pivotal point in the elaboration of an art practice today. Here, nested and flowing within, and along side, the numerous metaphoric systems, is constituted a position to generate a practice and position for ourselves which avoids the drawbacks of the situation in the last decades. The monolithic illusion of language, and the pessimistic inclinations toward the lost referent, is reinvented and repositioned in the circulation of the vast playing field of metaphors.

Without dismissing the lessons or faults of the postmodern or modern; the contemporary artist, their practice, and the plenitude of the grammars and languages available to them; are placed back on an equal level with the social. The very number of metaphors, grammars and discursive locales; and how these positions augment, confirm, interfere, and annihilate one another; reconfirms the assessments of the postmodern, while utilizing the circulations of metaphors harbored in every representation to reconstruct and redefine meanings fruitful to us.

The art practitioner of this century becomes a wanderer and gatherer of the "nomadic"(15) locales she or he will position themselves in regard to, and the *problematics* this will entail. And while no truth, nor even mimesis, is yearned after in the actualization of this endeavor of the contemporary art practitioner, languages, meanings, and the hierarchies they imply, cannot be conveniently sidestepped. Housed in the areas between meanings lies the vast and contingent possibilities of the circulations of languages and metaphors. A place where new meanings can be constructed, worked with, considered. A place in which a new art practice has begun to flourish.

- 1) "Though it may have started toward modernism earlier than the other arts, painting has turned out to have a greater number of *expendable* (italics Greenberg's) conventions imbedded in it, or at least a greater number of conventions that are difficult to isolate in order to expend." Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting", Art and Culture, (1961), Beacon Press, Boston, Mass. USA. It is interesting to note that in the same paragraph Greenberg calls this process a "self-purification" and one of "irreplacability" of the attendant objects.
- 2) "Each Icon partakes of some more or less character of its object" Charles Sanders Peirce. "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism" The Monist 16, (January 1906). See also, Peirce's "On the Nature of Signs", for a clear and succinct discussion of his ideas about signs and language.
- 3) Roland Barthes, S/Z, (1975), Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, USA
- 4) M.M. Bakhtin, The Problem of Speech Genres, Speech Genres and Other Essays, 1986, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA. Bakhtin enumerates a list of these "metaphoric locales" using their speech types: "...Brief military command, the elaborate and detailed order, the fairly variegated repertoire of business documents, and the diverse world of commentary. And we also include here the diverse forms of scientific statements and all literary genres." The term I am using, "locales", is based on Foucault's discussions of sites of power (see below), but has been developed quite extensively by Bakhtin (speech genres) and Richard Rorty (vocabularies) also (See Introduction (as well as many of the essays included), Richard Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, (1991), Cambridge Press, New York, USA).
- 5) Jacques Derrida, "Differance", Margins of Philosophy, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA 1982
- 6) Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", Ecrits, A Selection, (1977), Norton, New York, USA (pgs. 146 - 178)
- 7) Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punishment (1977), Vintage, New York and The Order of Things, (1970), Vintage, New York. For an interpretation of the view, *vis a vis* modernism and the rational project, see: Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, Chapters 9 and 10 (1990), MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. USA
- 8) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, (1961), Routledge and Kegan, London
- 9) "This two-sided mystery is linked to the fact that the truth can be evoked only in that dimension of the alibi in which all "realism" in creative works takes its virtue from metonymy; it is likewise linked to this other fact that we accede to meaning only through the double twist of metaphor when we have the one and only key, the S and s of the Saussurian algorithm are not on the same level, man only believes his true place is at their axis, which is *nowhere* (italics Lacan's)." Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud".
- 10) Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session", Dessemination, (1981) University of Chicago, Chicago, USA
- 11) "They (the text and the margin) interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin" Jacques Derrida, "Tympan", Margins of Philosophy
- 12) The concern, and dismissal, of the notions of originality and individual creation by one facet of postmodern art practice and theory come from this notion of the "individual" and its being trapped in the formations of the social.
- 13) This is why in the elaboration of a postmodernist art practice there has been such a focus and concern about the body and its "edges".
- 14) "In each culture of the past lie immense possibilities that have remained undisclosed, unrecognized and unutilized throughout the entire historical life of a given culture." M.M. Bakhtin, The Problem of Speech Genres.
- 15) Gilles Deleuze, Nomadology, (1978) Semiotext(e) volume 3, no. 1; for an interesting discussion of the circulation of meanings and a "logic" for these circulations. As well as Chapter 1 of Anti-Oedipus, 1983, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA

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