

Amy Park • Philip Vanderhyden

Amy Park, AT&T Switching Station With Buildings, 2006, watercolor, gouache on paper, 30" x 22"



MODERNISM NOW

by Annika Marie and Lane Relyea

"We're ready for modernism now." By "now," what Josephine Rydberg-Dumont, managing director of Ikea of Sweden, means is the first decade of the 21st century. And as for "modernism"? "When it first came," Rydberg-Dumont explains, "it was for the few. Now it is for the many. You value things that don't bog you down. ... That old, traditional stuff ... [the idea] that things can't change, that taking responsibility for your things is more important than taking responsibility for your life. It's OK to replace them, to get rid of them. We don't think we're going to live one way always. Our feeling is: It's just furniture. Change it." ⁽¹⁾

A concern with modernism — and just how ready we are for it — is among the more conspicuous things Amy Park and Philip Vanderhyden have in common. Their work in this show is for the most part abstract, formally austere at that, reminiscent of a kind of art-for-art's sake approach to painting in which the medium's constituent components and overall essential nature are laid bare. Even when the work is not abstract, as in Park's more zoomed-out views of the Kahn and Jacob AT&T switching center in midtown Manhattan that serves as the source motif for all of her works here, what's represented is an image of modernist architecture (the firm's junior partner, Robert Allan Jacob, studied with Le Corbusier). In previous work, Park had relied almost exclusively on mid-century international-style architecture and design for her subject matter — chairs and tables by Charles Eames, buildings and homes by Mies van der Rohe, and so on. While this nod to both representation and architecture continues to separate Park's current output from pure abstraction, so too does Vanderhyden's work distance itself from mid-century modernist painting. The luridly colored, metallic paint he uses, the photo-negative reversal implied by the foregrounded yet oddly absent paint strokes, the overall chilly demeanor (the color-drenched canvases of Newman, Rothko and Louis were said to "breathe," while Vanderhyden's color comes as if trapped in blocks of ice) — all this suggests more the mechanical processes and repetitions of Andy Warhol's and Roy Lichtenstein's pop, or the more recent hybridizations of pop and color abstraction concocted by Gerhard Richter and David Reed. The image of modernism that Park and Vanderhyden present is thus complicated, dialectical, entailing abstraction and realism, Bauhaus and pop and color-field and beyond. The work tightly twines various conflicting aspects of modernism's avant-garde past, both its withdrawal from society as well as its dream of merging art and life. This is the modernism that Clement Greenberg advocated, but also the kind Ikea has in mind.

"'International style' architecture, cubist and post-cubist painting and sculpture, 'modern' furniture and decoration and design are the manifestations of the new style." ⁽²⁾ This is not Ikea's Rydberg-Dumont talking, it's Greenberg. In 1949 he too thought that at last we were ready for modernism. And he wasn't alone: In the exhibition season spanning 1948-49, 12 different U.S. museums mounted shows dedicated to applied design. While collaborative models made by Jackson Pollock and architect Peter Blake were on view at Betty Parsons's gallery, a few blocks away MoMA opened "Painting and Sculpture in Architecture," an exhibition of photographs

Philip Vanderhyden, *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 26" x 34"

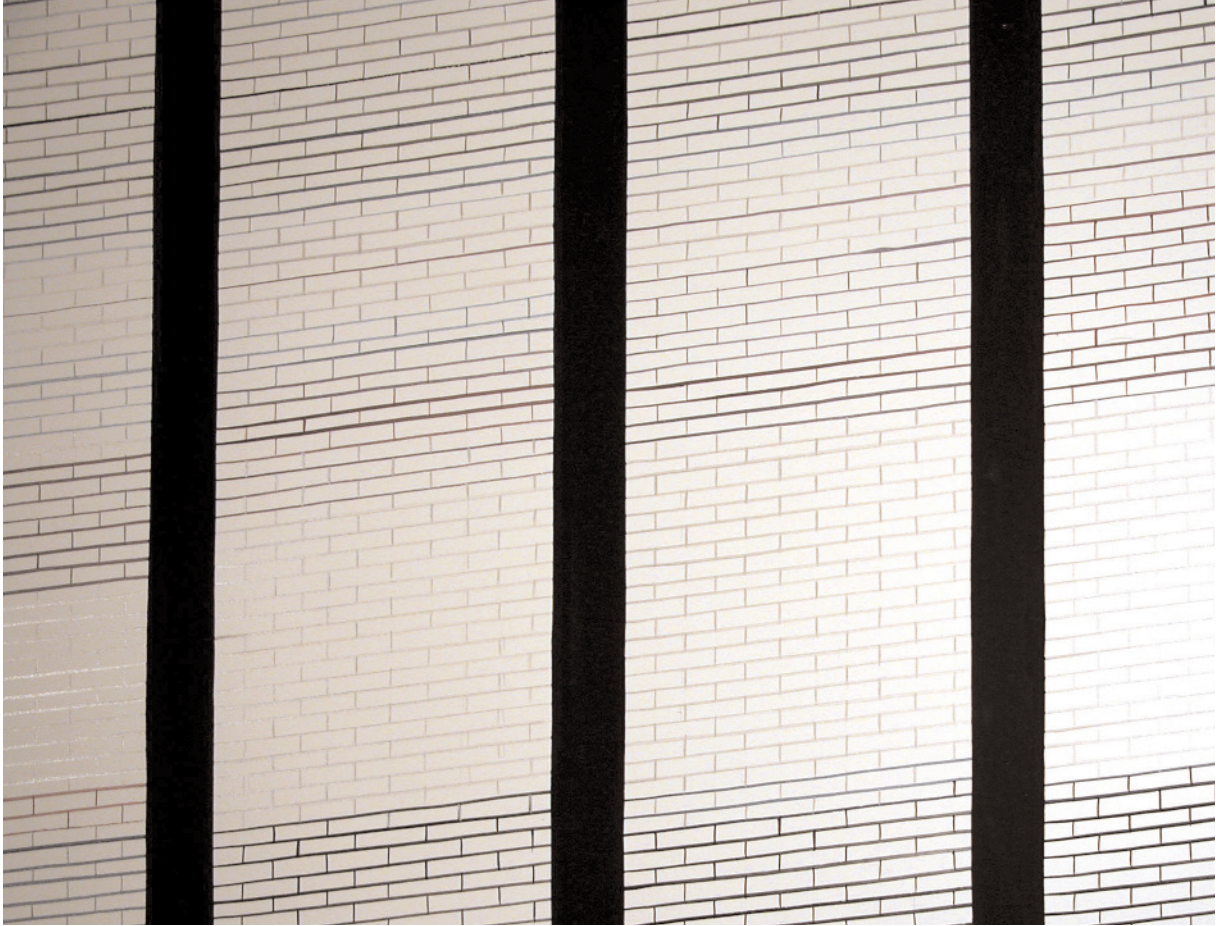


documenting the deployment of avant-garde art within modern architectural settings, while outside in the museum's sculpture garden a new "modern house" designed by Marcel Breuer was installed. That same year, MoMA also mounted "Modern Art in Your Life," whose catalog marveled at how "the appearance and shape of countless objects of our everyday environment are related to, or derived from, modern painting and sculpture, and that modern art is an intrinsic part of modern living."⁽³⁾ Greenberg, too, repeated a similarly cheerful account throughout the early '50s — that all the modernist arts were united, that all grew out of cubism insofar as cubism gave birth to collage, which in its turn morphed into bas-relief before finally giving way to constructivism, of which abstract sculpture and painting and International-style architecture and design were the furthest developments at present. Now a cubist-derived architecture and sculpture would enframe monumentally scale, wallpaper-like abstract paintings to constitute the quintessential modern habitus. A merger of art and life was on the horizon.

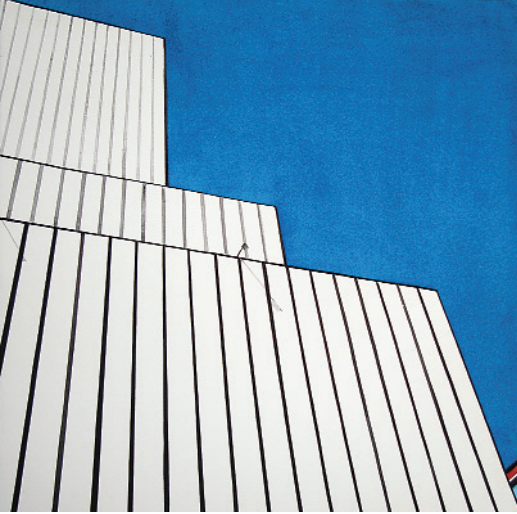
Up until the 1940s the question of finding an adequate social destination for advanced art was usually answered with a political prophecy — such a home was part of the promise of socialism. But with that promise seemingly extinguished by World War II, a more pragmatic home — i.e., actual architectural offerings, or the lack thereof — became an issue of paramount importance for critics, curators and other cultural institutions and interests. A widespread campaign to accommodate modern art within middle-class culture led to myriad interactions between artists, museums, galleries, architectural firms and furniture designers. The campaign's stated aim was to infuse everyday life with a material infrastructure grounded in its own consistent logic, that obeyed its own immanent laws, that was informed by modern industrialism and technology but not reducible to it — "an art resting on rationality but without permitting itself to be rationalized," as Greenberg phrased it.⁽⁴⁾ By presenting such a united front, art could perhaps reform society rather than be co-opted by it, engaging the culture while remaining aloof from its lowest-common-denominator market degradations. But this vision of a rationally integrated and ennobling grand modernist style also ignited a backlash in the form of late '50s neo-dada "anti-art," famous for its trash aesthetic and decidedly irrational "environments" — i.e., Allan Kaprow's improvised hovels made of chicken-wire, plastic-tarp and motley urban flotsam.



Philip Vanderhyden, *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 31" x 41.5"



Amy Park, *Brick AT&T Switching Station*, (horizontal detail), 2006, watercolor, gouache on paper, 45" x 110"



Amy Park, *Square AT&T Switching Station*, 2006, watercolor, gouache on paper, 45" x 45"

The neo-dada artists had learned a very different lesson from cubist collage. Here form followed dysfunction. This was an art governed by not rationality but disposability and obsolescence. And rather than being imperviously centered on its own immanent principles, it was theatrical, eventful, even spectacular, an art fit more for the stage than the home, that constantly gestured and appealed to some anticipated audience.

Almost a half century has passed since that moment, and the question still remains — so now are we finally ready for modernism? Since the '60s we've seen the rise to dominance of installation art, with its most recent variant emerging in relational aesthetics, a movement which again promises to deliver a grand integrated style, a fusing of architecture, design and art. Among such practitioners of relational aesthetics as Liam Gillick, Jorge Pardo and Tobias Rehberger, there is even a revival of Eames and other mid-century modernist designers. And never before has collage been such a ruling paradigm, with artists bricolaging, thrifting, mashing and otherwise intervening in everyday materials that are themselves continuous with and open to larger systems of exchange — the cubist papier collées writ large. "Artists today program forms more than they compose them," exclaims Nicolas Bourriaud, the author of *Relational Aesthetics*. "They remix available forms and make use of data ... [they] surf on a network of signs."⁶⁵ As the market logic of exchangeability permeates everything, the world of objects gets approached as so many articulated differences to use in an endlessly recombinable code, a generative semiotic of value, status and identity allowing for the constant production of subjectivities that are always already exteriorized as significations to be circulated and transacted. This is the new *gesamtkunstwerk*, art as integrated end-to-end product design, as a "total way of life."

But exactly what kind of modernism is this? Is it about the home or the stage, about a world in which we live or a world of distraction and display? Or has the home itself now become yet another instance of the stage, an arena in which to manipulate props and publicize subjectivity? Is today's modernism centered on its own immanent logic, a logic whose integrity remains distinct from that of the market? Or is its logic nothing other than disposability itself? ("Get rid of them, it's just furniture, change it," exhorts the managing director of Ikea.)

The work of Park and Vanderhyden belongs to both modernisms, the pure and the disposable. And it belongs to neither. Theirs is an art of contradiction — namely, the contradictions within modernism, and how such contradictions keep modernism from ever being something we could possibly be “ready” for. The discomfort of these contradictions helps remind us of that other aspect of the modernist project, the dark underside of its utopic vision of the total *gesamtkunstwerk* and the integration of art and life — here we confront negation, alienation, placelessness, all the ways in which we are not at home in the world, in which our everyday *habitus* is shown to be uninhabitable. In terms of Park’s and Vanderhyden’s work, these contradictions are most readily apparent in the perverse relations struck between image rendered and the conventions of medium. Park, for instance, works with watercolor but plays to none of the medium’s characteristic traits. Instead of the expected veils, mists and tints, the gentle bleeds and blottings of liquid color softly absorbed into paper support, Park gives us right-angled gridirons strictly articulated in blacks and whites, an image of those implacable surfaces of the urban world built by advanced engineering and mass armies of industrial labor. Watercolor is here made to serve a hard-hat aesthetic, providing the means of erecting skeletal foundation and social infrastructure. Contrast this to Vanderhyden’s works in oil paint, a more substantially plastic medium out of which the painter is to muscle forth sculptural form. But Vanderhyden instead plays the role of impressionist to Park’s cubist, his paintings dissolving both surface and substance into the indeterminacies of fleeting light and motion.

Like Park, Vanderhyden also reveals inconsistencies and gaps in what at first appears to be self-evident, pure painting. If Vanderhyden’s image indeed derives from impressionism’s atmospherics, it’s nevertheless an impressionism he apparently has wrought from what looks very much like battery acid splashed on steel plates. While Park forges structure from the insubstantiality of watercolor, Vanderhyden makes the image of insubstantiality seem a byproduct of industrial toxins and materials, of a lethally corrosive process leaving the merest ghost of form. And yet these ghosts count in Vanderhyden’s art as figurative, with each regally immortalized in portrait formats. By contrast, Park repeats and extends her architectural structure until it loses any connection to statuesque monument and shades more toward landscape, as if she were deploying a mere decorative pattern, the social world becomes wallpaper. Both artists leave unresolved such tensions, not in order to mask the identity of their medium but to engage it all the more broadly and ambitiously, precisely by reckoning with its many conflicted self-interests and historically unresolved debts.

So if not now, do we ever get to feel at home with modernism? Like most all paintings, the works in this show will also probably be put up for sale, perhaps get bought and one day hang over someone’s sofa. And the art will go well with everything else in the house — and that means everything, including all of the contradictions and unresolved debts all of us live and breathe everyday. In Vanderhyden’s paintings, for instance, it’s possible to see the proudly perched subject as it furiously gestures in a self-negating attempt to erase its own image, to withdraw its presence from the world, only to leave something much more conspicuously haunting, like the chalked outlines of figures at a police crime scene. And in Park’s watercolors of the monumental AT&T



Philip Vanderhyden, *Untitled*, 2006, oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

building, we encounter an image of the very communications technology that allows for so much of our social conviviality and cohesion. It's also precisely in such buildings across the country that the National Security Agency was recently directed to install secret rooms from which the federal government could conduct surveillance on its citizens without search warrants. And the reason the building has no windows? Well, like all such telecom fortresses, it was necessarily designed and constructed to withstand, among other things, a nuclear attack. Such is modernism. Welcome home.

Annika Marie is an independent scholar and free-lance critic operating from Evanston, IL. Lane Relyea is assistant professor of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University.

Notes

1. Quoted in John Leland, "How the Disposable Sofa Conquered America," *New York Times Magazine* (1 December 2002), Section 6: 86.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Our Period Style" (1949), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 323.
3. *Modern Art in Your Life* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 1.
4. Clement Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture" (1947), in *Collected Essays Vol. 2*, 168.
5. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 11, 13.

Amy Park

B.F.A. University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1999; M.F.A. University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2003; also studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her studio practice is focused on large-scale watercolor paintings that investigate architectural history along with themes of innovation and isolation. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including Mexico City, Mexico; Brussels, Belgium; Krems, Austria; and Munich, Germany. She recently had a solo show at Project Row Houses in Houston, TX, through an artist exchange with The Suburban Gallery in Oak Park, IL. This fall she will be exhibiting at The Wendy Cooper Gallery in Chicago, IL, and having a two-person show with her sister, Grace Park, at Occasional Art in St. Paul, MN. After living and working in Chicago for many years, she has recently relocated to New York City.

Philip Vanderhyden

Philip Vanderhyden received a B.F.A. from the University of Wisconsin—Madison, 2001, and an M.F.A. from Northwestern University, 2004. Recent exhibitions include "The Believers" curated by Michelle Grabner, "Succeeding Where the Hippies Failed" curated by Ethan Breckenridge, "Allover and At Once" curated by Lane Relyea, a solo and group show at The Suburban Gallery in Oak Park, IL, and other exhibitions throughout the United States. He was recently a visiting artist at Wesleyan University, NE. He teaches part-time and works in Chicago.

Gahlberg Gallery

Amy Park and Philip Vanderhyden

Thursday, Oct. 12, to

Saturday, Nov. 18, 2006

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Barbara Wiesen

Director and Curator



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