

***Art Education:***  
**Content and Practice**  
**in a**  
**Postmodern Era**



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What seems to be at the very heart and soul of modernism is its internalization, its insistence upon being what Donald Kuspit calls "introspective" (1988, p. 82). In other words, modern art has a preoccupation with form. For art to be modern it must attend to itself, it must search for and confirm its own boundaries as delineated by its own inwardness. What explains a work of art, what informs a work of art, and what frames a work of art for judgment is its own canons, its own parameters of form and medium. Put simply, modern art is about itself, about its own form, and in its most extreme and idealistic sense about nothing else but form!

The condition of modernism has been described as one where "the artist becomes an expert (like the scientist) in an autonomous realm decentered from the larger cultural stream and split off from the realities and responsibilities of everyday communication" (Risatti, 1990, p. 9). In other words, modern artists can be thought of as isolated, as alone, and making art that is about itself and that does not care about anything else! It is precisely this internalization of the art that has led to modernism being characterized as "decentered." One contemporary critic wrote that "all in all, it (modern art) seemed to have as little to do with life in the street outside as the work of any other academic art" (Godfrey, 1986, p. 9). Thus, this negative condition of formalism and modernism, "decenteredness," leads the artist to an unknowingly separatist, isolationist stance where Rome could continue burning with neither the artist's knowledge or concern. After all, what does modern art have to do with life?

What is interesting here is that a philosophical definition of modern art, i.e., formalism, transformed art into a non-contextual, decentered human activity and this may have provided an appropriate and necessary impersonalism to art. The art critic Kuspit, for example, suggests that formalism may unconsciously be "an attempt to protect art from political, psychological, or cultural interpretations for such interpretations make art vulnerable to the kind of censorship represented by the Nazis" (1988, p. 96) and it might be noted that we have recently witnessed the obvious political consequence of Senator Jesse Helms, who negatively responded to "less-than-impersonal" Mapplethorpe photographic images as "immoral" and not worthy of government support.

Modernism, then, for all of its stylistic variations and "isms," nonetheless, is molded by a simple preoccupation with internalization. Above all else it is the intent of modernism to concern itself with the essence of the artistic act, the character of its medium, and the visual ambience of the encounter. Modern artists are not concerned with their art having a message or a point to it; rather, modern artists want their art work to look good, to cause visual pleasure. For well over a century now we have grown accustomed to exercises in color, line, space, and edge as being not only legitimate but profoundly and aesthetically essential adventures for artists and viewers alike. Modernists have come to accept isolation and a subsequent "impersonalness" as co-requisites for both the making of as well as the experiencing of art.