

# **Modernism: Suicide of Art?**

## Reflections of the Collection of the Neue Galerie Graz

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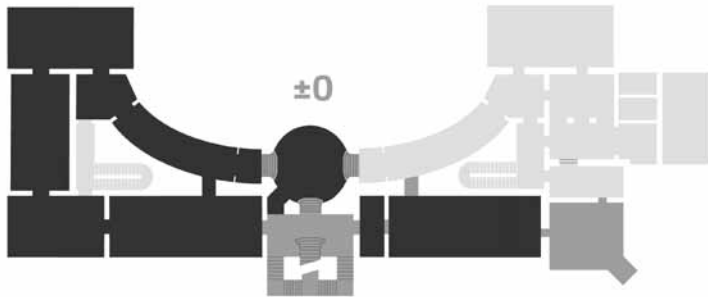
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What happens when art no longer depicts and represents reality but rather exhibits it directly? When the illusion of reality, i.e. its portrayal in art, is replaced by the existence of reality itself? Is the loss of represented reality truly tantamount to a suicide of art, because it seems to have cut the ground from under its own significance? In ten topics, this break in art history is expounded as the birth of modernism with the aid of some 350 works from the museum's own holdings from 1800 to the present.



# Modernism: Suicide of Art?

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### Line

Kandinsky described the line as the trace of the moving point, thus expressing that making pictures with lines requires a certain skill. Abstract lines have been found on 35,000-year-old artefacts of bone or stone. The classical arts used the line to depict the world of objects, attaining great skill in creating faithful representations of the world. The aim was to portray, suggest, sketch or hatch objects with the aid of lines so as to secure them on paper. In modernism, however, the line begins to break away from the object. Around 1900, a group of young artists founded a magazine in Vienna that, as a Sacred Spring (Ver Sacrum), would usher in the linear ornamentation of Viennese Art Nouveau by leaving the line, devoid of purpose, to its own devices in geometric and floral patterns. In the end, the abstract line, drawing further and further away from the object, represented itself alone.

As of the 1960s, the line itself became an actual material. It began to free itself from the support medium, stepping out of the picture, and extending into three dimensions. It did so both objectively and abstractly, on the one hand depicting bodies or objects or, on the other, only itself.

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## Colour

The development of colour took place parallel to that of the line. It also emancipated itself from the realistic depiction of the world of objects, coming to find its place in three dimensions as real colour. In traditional art, the purpose of colour, as local colour, was to reproduce as faithfully as possible the natural colours of depicted reality. At the same time, however, colours always had and have a symbolic meaning, too, that can be explained by the particular era or culture. While we interpret red as a symbol of activity, passion, revolution or socialism, white stood for a long time for innocence and purity, whereas black can signify a colourless end, death. Green, consisting of blue and yellow, can mean growth or calm, in Christianity it can be seen as the colour of resurrection, while Islam records it as Mohammed's favourite colour.

Around 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe studied the theory of colours in great depth. His reflections on the nature of colours influenced the painting of romanticism, that dealt explicitly with

the symbolism of colours. With the aid of free symbolic colour associations, symbolism also began to assist the portrayal of abstract concepts. At the end of the 19th century, when (symbolic) local colour was ousted by the freely employed colour of impressionism, the path was laid for the absolute colour of the future. The autonomous patch of colour was to evoke an image of the object in the eye of the beholder and to capture the impression of the world at a particular moment. Expressionism began to radicalise colour, seeking to use colour to achieve maximum expression.

With the aid of geometrical forms in pure colours as an expression of "pure sensation", Kazimir Malevich radically wrested colour from the object in suprematism around 1915. About the same time, Wassily Kandinsky arrived at abstract colour freed from the object by way of the lyrical abstraction of nature.

Thence began the experimental exploration of pure, absolute colour in art that may be observed throughout the 20th century. Since the 1950s, reflec-

tions on colour as material led to the substitution of colour by materials, to be applied to a support in the material picture. Finally, colour was detached from its support medium, becoming free, appearing, for example, as colour cubes of pure pigment. On the other hand, colour could break away completely from the material, radiating into space as coloured light.

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## Light

Line and colour were two important driving forces behind painting en route to abstraction. The urge of colour to expand first led to expansion on the plane and thus to the monochrome panel painting. As colour broke away from the plane, light stepped out into three dimensions, filling and thus able to change real space in the form of light colour.

Of course, light always played a key role in painting, being, as it is, one of its essential preconditions. Ancient lore has it that painting arose from a silhouette, from capturing a shadow cast by a figure on a wall. In painting, light can only be depicted by means of colours, whose contrasts and nuances determine its intensity. Light – and shade – was used particularly to portray the world of objects, for example to make events appear more dramatic, or to transport certain moods.

When photography, “drawing with light”, was invented in the mid-19th century, it came to rival figurative art. With the aid of technical apparatus and light,

it was now possible to depict the world of objects directly. In the 1920s, Man Ray dispensed with the (photographic) apparatus, using light to draw directly on photographic paper by placing objects on the paper and allowing the light to create an image of them on it (rayography), and thus working directly with real light.

As real light increasingly conquered art, artificial light began to change architecture, the urban space, and thus life itself. In modern cities, night was turned into day, and the inexorable rise of neon signs began. Light art left the colour space of painting, using artificial light such as neon tubes, light bulbs or other lamps to create sculptures in three dimensions. Ultimately, this led to the coloured light displays of light shows, discotheques, and other settings.

With the advent of real light, its parallel world, real shadow, also entered the world of art. In the 1960s, for example, Giuseppe Uncini materialised in his sculptures the shadows cast by objects on their surroundings.

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## Music/sound

In traditional art, music was represented by musicians or their instruments. In terms of the power of colours and the dynamics of representation, music remained a silent, if often vividly imaginable event. Since ancient times, various musical instruments were invested with symbolic meanings. The lute, for example, with strings tuned in unison, stood for harmony, peace and the right measure. Being made of a pig’s bladder, the bagpipe, in turn, was held to be an instrument of the Devil. Pieter Brueghel used it, for example, for moralising purposes, in order to describe the dissolute, depraved life of the peasantry. In the 19th century, as domestic music became increasingly popular, so too did its portrayal, and music life in the concert halls, with its famous composers and conductors and musicians, also found its way into the visual arts.

Around 1900, tone, sound, noise advanced into the visual arts. The possibility of representing audible phenomena became a field for experimentation in emergent

abstract painting. Kandinsky, for example, was concerned with reflecting on colour-tone relationships. Can we hear colours or see sounds?

As light later freed itself from colour, so too did music free itself from painting. Sound became an art medium in its own right as of 1950. Sound art, finally, combines real sounds with other media, be it as dramatic performance on stage, as film, as installation or as happening. What these different forms of representations share is their experimentation with new (technical) possibilities in order to visualise acoustic phenomena, and vice versa. Real instruments, real sounds supersede the representation of musicians, composers and tones (as in the score).

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## Motion

In order to depict motion, traditional art was performed based on the assumption of its course, of how the naked eye can perceive it. For this reason, motion was regarded as a very difficult task in painting. This changed with the advent of photography, that was capable of capturing and documenting the various stages of motion. Suddenly people knew the actual position of a horse's legs while running, or the exact sequence of wing movements of a bird in the air. The new technical possibilities of fast movement thanks to trains and cars also resulted in a new perception, for example of the landscape. These findings caused painters to become interested in the possibility of depicting dynamics. Futurism tested the simultaneous representation of a sequence of movements in a picture, capturing speed on canvas, while film evolved into the art of motion proper. Knowledge about actual sequences of movement raised the question as to how the human eye works, and what perception really is. This led to op art and kinetics,

art movements that focus specifically on the optical processes of motion. When Duchamp mounted his wheel on a stool in 1913, not only did the everyday object enter the museum as a ready-made, so too did real motion.

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## Landscape

Landscape painting reflects man's relationship to nature by portraying specific instances. This may be in very concrete, topographically precise terms or in an idealised, romanticised form. Significantly, landscape painting arose in ancient Greek times not out in the countryside, but in the city, where a visual counter-image was created from a distance. Around 1800, landscapes became romantic spaces of yearning, an integral part of the classicist, ideal projection of the world or of the Biedermeier notion of a perfect world. Since the Enlightenment, the topographic survey of the world has played an increasingly important role. The industrial revolution in the 19th century and its profound impact on nature and landscape brought a change in the view of the world and hence its representation. People now went out into the countryside to paint, striving to record a realistic picture of the surrounding landscape. The impressionists captured the actual fleeting atmosphere of what they saw. This art movement was pursued

in Austria until well into the 20th century in the mitigated form of atmospheric realism.

Around World War II, however, the landscape had largely disappeared from the repertoire of the avant-gardes, only to be rediscovered as material in the 1960s. Land art began to shape or manipulate the real landscape itself, real space, or elements of it. At the same time, nature was brought into the gallery and museum as a material of art (mounds of earth, stone circles, to name but a few).

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## Still life

The depiction of dead or inanimate objects is called still life.

Fruit, flowers, dead animals, crockery, books, instruments and the like were arranged according to aesthetic, thematic and symbolic aspects (with these depictions becoming works in their own right as of around 1600). Grapes or wine could be seen as symbols of Christ, while glass stood for the purity and innocence of Mary. Lavishly laid table arrangements with magnificent dishes, cutlery and glasses are indicative of luxury and affluence, while vanitas still lifes with skull, extinguished candle and hourglass are reminders of the transience that will put an end to pleasurable indulgence. Beyond these symbolic meanings, still life painting allowed artists like hardly any other genre of painting to showcase their skill and mastery in depicting the material world. Still life painting, like landscape painting, became extremely popular once again in the 19th century. Famous examples include the numerous still lifes created by Cézanne, in which he studied and tested his revolutionary and pioneering view of

objects and their representation on the two-dimensional picture plane.

The advent of cubism at the beginning of the 20th century saw the arrival of real materials such as oilcloth, old wallpaper, newspaper, etc. in still life painting. This gave rise to material collages and assemblages (arrangements of mundane objects), and the art of real objects was born. The theme of the laid table remained topical, for example in the famous “snare-pictures” of Daniel Spoerri (as of 1960), for which he fixed all of the things on a table after a meal in their coincidental position, tilting the table into the vertical and exhibiting it as a picture.

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## Interior/furniture

The representation of indoor scenes is called interior painting. Like still life, it had become emancipated as a pictorial genre in its own right in the 17th century, with such examples as the famous church interiors by the Dutch painters of this period. In politically restrictive Biedermeier times, when many people withdrew from public life and the private sphere experienced an increase in status, the entire room with its furnishings became the stage for a painted scene. In this domestic environment, often depicted down to the last detail, everyday moments were often portrayed in a transfigured manner, as ideal, genteel introspection. Sitting, or the requisite seat, that serves the purpose of a moment's pause, often plays a special role in such pictures. Around 1900, in the era of art nouveau, pieces of furniture are arranged in the form of total works of art, as part of interiors composed in great detail. When furniture finds its way into the museum, however, it may – divested of its function – also become sculpture. The borderline

between sculpture and furniture begins to blur, the everyday object becomes unusable, transported into a museified citation. The development from depicted interior to furniture sculpture revolves around this question as to an object's usefulness and uselessness. Utility objects are usually usable, while art works, in the common sense, are not. The surrealists, for example, play on this contrast when they put nails into an iron or make a cup out of fur, as do such contemporary artists as Art & Language or Martin Kippenberger, who build a table or sofa out of pictures.

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## Audience participation

Like similar movements from the 1960s, popular op art concerned itself with our perception. Its objects often force the beholder to assume a precisely defined position or movement in front of the work, i.e. to take active part in its creation. In like manner, and even more clearly, instructions for the audience came into play as the concept of sculpture widened to encompass the real object. Franz West, for example, invited his audience to gesticulate madly behind screens designed by him or to act with an *Adaptive* provided by him. By having them pose with simple everyday objects, Erwin Wurm turns people into "One-Minute Sculptures". The audience, then, assumes a key role in the realm of art, taking part in the creative act, in the composition of the work. In the documentation of such participatory actions, photography and film play a special role as they capture the fleeting action and confirm its existence. Yet not only the action guided by instructions becomes art, but also the audience itself when, for example, it stumbles into Michael

Schuster's "Autofocus trap", finding itself on a monitor in the exhibition.

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## Body

Representations of naked bodies as nudes were originally intended to help study motion, the transition from one action to the next, which could be best viewed on a unclothed model. Nude drawing was compulsory at the academy, with the latter even becoming synonymous with this exercise. The revelation of sequences of movements by photography fragmented the body in its integrity, reassembling it fragmentarily in painting, photography and collage. Finally, the resolution of the body in the representative pictorial representation turned the body itself into a picture. Marcel Duchamp, the key figure of modernism, shaved a star on his head, thus making his body the surface of the picture. In the latter half of the 20th century, the body took on a new role in the course of performance and happening, culminating in body art as a form of artistic expression. The body became a material, a means of design, and a support medium. Günter Brus, one of the most important exponents of Viennese actionism, formulated the principle

of his body art as follows in 1965: *"My body is the intention. My body is the event. My body is the result."*

The Austrian expressionists such as Schiele, Kokoschka or Gerstl questioned their own torn or injured identity by means of very immediate representation of the body and the self. The self-painting and self-mutilation of the Viennese actionists seemed to be their logical extension, one that would, of necessity, lead to the utter self-destruction of the artist and the suicide of art.



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