DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION IN MODERNIST ART

Eleonora Dragomir
Universitatea *Ovidius* Constanța

Rezumat
Scopul lucrarii de fata este de a prezenta curentele modernismului in artele vizuale ca avand fiecare propriul program de 'distrugere' a ceea ce artistii considerau a fi normele si conventiile artei. Artistii erau adesea sub influenta intenselor interese personale, antipatii si puncte de vedere care ii duceau dincolo de programul miscarii respective.

Each of the movements of modernist visual art had its own particular program of destruction of what the new artists saw as art's culturally sanctioned norms and conventions. Individual artists often had intense personal interests, antipathies, and viewpoints that carried them beyond the program of a particular movement, so that the tide of convention destroying was as various as it was pervasive. Among numerous other things artists repudiated what they saw as art's inhibition of their individuality, its supercilious social role, its obliviousness of the technological-industrial world, and its obsolescence in terms of the new epistemological insights.

'The attacks had as a common basis the realization that conventional pictorial representation narrowed and simplified the whole perceptual event. It excluded differing perspectives, the individuality and the motives of the seer, the multiple characteristics of the object, and to a large extent it the determined effects of the social, religious, and artistic contexts. Modernist artists variously attempted to focus artistic attention on these aspects of the wider event that were conventionally ignored. The time-honored tradition of concealing the stage machinery yielded to the new impulse to encompass the wider event. '(Martin 1991:157)

The cubists were the first to force the issue- Picasso and Georges Braque painted their way and left it to others to rationalize and explain the destructions. The pictures they were doing in the 1900s and early teens- for example *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* or *Ma Jolie, Still Life with Violin and Pitcher or Le Portugais*- were aggressive assaults on all standard ways of knowing and representing physical objects. They reconstructed the physical world according to radical insights about volume and point of view and

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

destroyed shape and perspective and recognizability in the process. In a 1911 article art critic and cubist apologist Roger Allard cited the destructionist "shared ideal" of the new "*group*": "*To react with violence against the notation of the instant, the insidious anecdotalism and all the other surrogates that pass under the name of impressionism*." (Martin 1991:157)

The futurists drew similar conclusions by working in the opposite direction, beginning with principles and then producing the art to go with them. As Marjorie Perloff recently pointed out, there was a "manifesto fever that swept across Europe in the years preceding the First World War," (1986: 45) with the futurists in the vanguard, producing over fifty manifestos by 1915 and fine-honing the manifesto as a literary genre in itself. A 1910 manifesto, signed by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, declares, for example: "We will fight with all our might the fanatical, senseless and snobbish religion of the past, a religion encouraged by the vicious existence of museums. We rebel against that spineless worshipping of old canvases, old statues and old bric-a-brac, against everything which is filthy and worm-ridden and corroded by time." They vow to "destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with the ancients, pedantry and academic formalism," and to "support and glory in our day-to-day world, a world which is going to be continually and splendidly transformed by victorious Science." They want their art to express "the tangible miracles of contemporary life--the iron network of speedy communications which envelops the earth, the transatlantic liners, the dreadnoughts, those marvelous flights which furrow our skies, the profound courage of our submarine navigators and the spasmodic struggle to conquer the unknown" (quoted in Martin 1991:158). A manifesto by Carlo Carra details some of the necessary destructions, including "the extremely vulgar perspectives of *trompe-l'oeil* . . .The concept of colour harmonies. . . . Contemplative idealism, which I have defined as a *sentimental mimicry of apparent nature*. . . . [and] All anecdote and detail" (Apollonio 1973:219). Even the parameters of art and literature and music were under attack: other futurists urged "The chaotic, unaesthetic and heedless mixing of all the arts already in existence and of all those which are and will be created by the inexhaustible will for renewal which futurism will be able to infuse into mankind.", "Our art will probably be accused of tormented and decadent cerebralism," a manifesto by the original five concludes, "But we shall merely answer that we are, on the contrary, the primitives of a new sensitiveness, multiplied hundredfold, and that our art is intoxicated with spontaneity and power" (Apollonio 1973:219).

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

Whatever its future as art, destructionism was enormously successful in establishing an atmosphere of liberation. The art world of the early twentieth century became a riot of experimentation, much of it along epistemological lines. The object itself and the way that it looks were neither longer presumptive givens nor were they inevitably central interests for the artists. As artists strove for ways to access the wider perceptual event, their works often in effect put the emphasis on modes of perception, methods of representation, and the artistic processes themselves. Objects were denatured, deconstructed, contorted, and displaced, while artists explored any and every conceivable aspect of their relationship to them. The new art avidly experimented with the object's great variety of real and potential visual aspects; its formal qualities; its iconic possibilities; its growth or decay, motion or process; its capacities to evoke or reflect or symbolize or block subjective responses; its political, social or subconscious significances. Concurrently, new techniques and new pictorial (and antipictorial) languages were being developed, sometimes themselves the virtual (or actual) objects of thepresentations..

At one extreme many artists were experimenting with literalism and with highly object-oriented art, attempting representations that might either reveal the independent otherness of the object, discover connections between the object's formal elements and human sensibility, or in some other way stimulate sophisticated scrutiny of human intermediation in the artistic process. The ultimate object-oriented art is of course the readymade: it says to us simply "I am what I am; I represent myself" A little less far out on the same objectivist road are Rayographs, cameraless photographs produced by Man Ray (at first in a casual, chance gesture) by placing miscellaneous objects on an unexposed sheet of photographic paper and turning on the light. The objects "photographed" themselves, producing an abstraction made up of silhouette and gradations of nearsilhouette. Such were some artists' experiments with the capacity of the object to affect our senses. "Straight photography" would seem to be another noninterventionist form of art, defined by its practitioners among the American photographers as the production of clear representations using untampered cameras and nonmanipulative processing techniques.

In Strand's words, "It is in the organization of this objectivity that the photographer's point of view toward Life enters in, and where a formal conception born of the emotions, the intellect, or of both, is as inevitably necessary for him, before an exposure is made, as for the painter, before he puts brush to canvas" (Quoted in John Pultz and Catherine B. Scallen1981:25). Alfred Stieglitz, was as radical as any artist of the first decade. Feeling that art

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

and its end results were all- important, he opened his Photo-Session Gallery (nicknamed "291" in 1905) where he exhibited any work of art which could act as a protagonist going against staid art concepts. Stieglitz defended anything new in art and battled for modern art. He won artistic renown for his innovative photography and introduced hundreds of American and European Modernists to the American public. Stieglitz had already forged an allegiance with a select group of American artists, including O'Keeffe, Dove, Hartley, Marin, Charles Demuth, and photographer Paul Strand. Headed by Stieglitz, this tightly knit group, through their association with writers such as Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams, promoted an enlightened commitment to the art and artists of America. As Stieglitz and his circle sought to define an authentic American identity, they looked toward cultivating a national spirit derived strictly from the American soil. The Armory Show attempted to display all of the artistic developments which led to the current 1913 art trends. Works were shown by Ingres, Corot, Monet, Cassal, Rodin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Daumier, Dufy, Friesz, Matisse, Archipenko, Picasso, Kandinsky, Maillol, Brancusi, Rousseau, Davies, Dabo, Kuhn, Dove, Myers and many other artists. The masses were outraged, confused, uneasy, ridiculing and overwhelmed by the art which they viewed. The emblem of the Armory Show, an uprooted pine tree, was taken from the Massachusetts flag carried into battle during the Revolutionary War. The application of the American Revolution consciously introduced the Armory Show and its participants as part of an international avant-garde, but also reminded the audience of the integral connection between American culture and political revolution. "The New Spirit," the motto of the Armory Show was and continues to be liberally connected not just to changes in the visual arts but also to social, cultural, and political transformations. Retrospective analysis of the Armory Show’s impact on individual artists has been one of the most prevalent ways of explaining the genesis of modern art in America prior to Abstract Expressionism. Despite the critical focus on European, primarily French artists, over half the exhibitors at the New York show were citizens of the United States. Although most American artists were ignored by critics, some received attention for their movement away from representational form. Most art historians expeditiously mention the equally important influence of Alfred Stieglitz’s shows at the Little Galleries of Photo-Secession, known as '291' for its address at 291 5th Avenue. Stieglitz championed artists like Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso as well as early American modernists John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Oscar Bluemner, and Abraham Walkowitz, all of whom participated in the International Exhibition.

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

Stieglitz's exhibitions reflect the presence of modern art in America before the Armory Show and influenced a small group of artists, critics, and others living and working in New York. However, '291' was virtually unknown to the general public, and especially inaccessible to those artists living outside Manhattan.

While the effects of the Armory Show on American painters and sculptors have been hotly debated, the exhibition has been cited as a fomenter for American literary modernism as well. In his autobiography, William Carlos Williams discussed the Armory Show as a zero hour: "There was at that time a great surge of interest in the arts generally before the First World War. New York was seething with it. Painting took the lead. It came to a head for us in the famous 'Armory Show' of 1913" (Williams 1951:134). Nevertheless Christopher J. MacGowan dismisses the influence of the Armory Show on Williams, calling it a "red herring . . . [Williams] did not attend the show; his interest in painters and his adaptation of painterly ideas to his poetic strategy are evident in his writings before 1913" (1984:56). These biographical debates merely secure the status of the exhibition in the history of American modernism- so strong was the Armory Show's clout that Williams aligned his own history with this epic event.

The precisionist movement in American painting - principally involving some artists of the Stieglitz group, such as Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth - operated similarly, though they seemed dedicated to discovering formal and societal, rather than personal, values. They strove for an extreme in literalism well beyond that of American realists like Sloan and Glackens - for a kind of superrealism or architectural trompe-l'oeil. The paintings in that mode, like Sheeler's *Upper Deck*, a complex composition of rooftop machinery, feature an amazing clarity of detail and architectural line that is practically photographic. Yet closer examination reveals that the verisimilitude is stark, formal, idealized. As critic Martin L. Friedman says, "in the precisionist paintings of skyscrapers, bridges, factories, and docks, all traces of damage or decay disappeared, specific architectural details were vastly simplified, and these forms were recast as the proud symbols of technological splendor." Of their technique, he states, "the pictures are brought to an icily defined and flawless finish, with virtually no evidence of the brush strokes or the trials and hesitations of arriving at the finished stage" (Fry 1986:166). In a manner of speaking object became form in the precisionist paintings; it was photographic realism (at least in Sheeler's case), dominated by the artist's sense of pure composition. Knowing was the rationalizing, the purifying of actuality.

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

Another innovation in the literalistic representation of objects was the use by several cubist painters of fragments of literalism in their paintings and collages. Picasso's *Still Life with Violin and Fruit* (1913), for example, is a two-dimensional cubist composition that features virtually every conceivable form of representation on the literal-to-figurative scale: the violin is figured partly in scraps of barely suggestive sketch, partly in vivid three-dimensional drawing, partly in shape outline and cutouts, and partly in trompe-l'oeil wood-grain painting. The fruit is trompe-l'oeil painting on white scraps layered over real newspaper. Likewise, Braque's *Le Courrier* (1913) presents some of its details in barely sketched ideographic form, some in *trompe-l'oeil* patterning, and some in the actual presence of pieces of newspaper. ‘One effect of such radical and aggressive mixture of media and forms, of course, is to parody representational art and to call attention to the artistic process in all its artificiality’ (Fry 1986:166). Picasso once said "art has always been art and not nature. And from the point of view of art there are no concrete or abstract forms, but only forms which are more or less convincing lies"(quoted in Fry 1986:119). In respect to the pasted-in object - the fragment of ready-made - the mixing of levels of figurativeness creates a double framework of significance. Art historian Marjorie Perloff offers this explanation, from a manifesto of the group *Mu*, in her discussion of the significance of collage: "Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality" (Perloff 1986:47). As is the case with the full-scale ready-made, the object is denatured, given a new significance, but it is still itself, bringing along some of its original context as aura. Representing the wider perceptual event becomes in this case a matter of varying and contrasting contexts. The collage technique has literary analogs in Stein's word assemblages and Dos Passos' infusions of bits of actual pop song and newspaper story.

Styles of cubism changed rapidly, and artists like Picasso, Gris, and Picabia were restless and incessant inventors, like explorers anxious not to let any new territory go undiscovered (or be discovered first by somebody else), so that cubism appears to be best described not as a coherent program but as a set of tendencies, varied and even disparate. Although its origins seem to have been purely painterly (Picasso insisted that this was so), a good deal of it was in keeping with the emerging views of space, time, and events as relativistic and with the new idea of there being any number of possible geometries. Art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, friend and promoter of the cubist painters

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

from the beginning, wrote that the cubists were solving the problem of the essential conflict between representation and structure in new ways that respected spatial structure more than surface appearance. "Cubism," he said, "brings the forms of the physical world as close as possible to their underlying basic forms. Through connection with these basic forms, upon which all visual and tactile perception is based, cubism provides the clearest elucidation and foundation of all forms" (Kahnweiler 1949:14). Picasso's famous portrait of Kahnweiler is a complete reconstruction of the subject in geometric fragments - cubes and cylinders, triangles and trapezoids - of varied depths and tones and densities. The details of a head - a hairline, the bridge of a nose, an ear, and a moustache - are schematically suggested in an upper-right-center portion of the canvas that stands out in the density of its volumes and the sharpness of its lines. But for those scant details and the title Picasso gave the picture, it is like a vision of houses and rooftops on a distant hillside, if it is like anything at all. The next stage in the cubist style would present volumeless, two dimensional compositions (no "cubes" at all!) and stress the relationships between objects: their shapes, tones, patterns, and various perspectives intermixed and overlayered. Picasso's *Still Life with a Bottle of Maraschino* (1914) and Juan Gris's *The Watch* (1912) and *The Washstand* (1912) are examples of this kind of redefinition of the object. The cubist artist was engaging in a very special kind of abstraction, one that called attention to the fact of the artist's extremely individual intervention yet suggested very little about the artist's own personality. Art historian Guy Habasque suggests the way that Picasso, for example, arrived at his conceptions:

his new method was to penetrate, by an act of intuition, into the essence of the object and thus to discover its basic characteristics, those that conditioned its very being, and lacking which it would not be what it is. And the next step...was to integrate them into a single image, constituting as it were the pictorial essence of the object. The resulting picture would thus contain, potentially, all possible individuations of the object... the essential entity (quoted in Fry 1986:76).

The Italian futurists developed a thoroughgoing aesthetic based on the concept of motion. "What we want to do is to show the living object in its dynamic growth," declared Boccioni; and Anton Bragaglia, the founder of "photodynamism," put it that "*We seek the interior essence of things: pure movement; and we prefer to see everything in motion*, since as things are dematerialized in motion they become idealized, while still retaining, deep down, a strong skeleton of truth." Boccioni cited Bergson's theories denying

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

the divisibility of motion and the conceptualizing of matter into "autonomous bodies with absolutely defined contours" and produced such paintings as *The Forces of a Street* (1911) and *Charge of Lancers* (1915) using multiple and overlayered images, long diagonals, acute angles, and such to signify motion. "A running horse has not four legs, but twenty, and their movements are triangular," a 1910 manifesto had insisted. The futurists had a yearning to depict what they referred to as "the simultaneousness of the ambient": the miscellaneous welter of unconnected details and events that make up any given experience in the fullness of its context (Apollonio 1973:90).
The incessant drive to get new insight from the object led to ever greater degrees of abstraction, especially in the works of the Netherlands group "*de Stijl*" and the abstract expressionists. De Stijlist Piere Mondrian developed a purely geometric style, using straight lines and rectangles and primary colors in an effort to represent the unity and balance that he felt underlay the phenomenal world. "The peculiarities of form and natural color evoke subjective feelings that obscure the pure truth" he maintained (Pultz and Scallen 1981:132). Expressionist Wassily Kandinsky felt that "in each manifestation [of art] is the seed of a striving toward the abstract, the non-material,"(Martin 1991:163) and, intuiting a system of correspondences between specific colors and forms and specific "spiritual values," he in time worked himself free from all objective reference in his painting. The deeper motive he strove to realize in his work was not (as with Mondrian) the formal structure of the world but "inner need" (about which more later). In both cases, however, the material objects of this world were things to be passed beyond or through to some more ultimate realm.
At the farthest extreme from literalism, the work of Robert Delaunay and Kasimir Malevich (among others) achieved the complete disappearance of the object from the work of art. Delaunay's purely abstract compositions were designated "Orphic Cubism" by his friend, writer Guillaume Apollinaire: "*Orphic Cubism*...is the art of painting new structures with elements which have not been borrowed from the visual sphere, but have been created entirely by the artist himself, and been endowed by him with fullness of reality...This is pure art"(Fry 1986:117). Delaunay's *Disk* (1912) is simply a set of concentric circles, divided horizontally and vertically, with the resulting quarter rings painted in different colors. The colors are strategically, semiscientifically juxtaposed to vary in forwardness and intensity so that (according to Delaunay's theory) they "vibrate" dynamically for the viewer. Malevich, less technical and more doctrinaire, concocted "suprematism," an attempt at an

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

utterly contentless art. "The essential content of Suprematism," he asserted, "is the totality of non-objective, natural excitations without any goal or purpose.... The intrinsic idea of art is non-objectivity." In his works, such as *Suprematist Painting* (a huge cross, off-center and off-balance, made by a thick red vertical rectangle intersecting a black horizontal one on a plain white canvas), he strove for the "supremacy of pure sensation"(quoted in Martin 1991:164). What "pure sensation" he was after might be indicated by his recollection of the response one of his early suprematist works elicited: "In the year 1913 in my desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world I fled to the form of the Square and exhibited a picture which was nothing more or less than a black square upon a white background. The critics moaned and with them the public: 'everything we loved is lost: We are in a desert.... Before us stands a black square on a white ground.'"(quoted in Martin 1991:164).

Like the scientists and visual artists of their day, they were fascinated with methodology: discovery through process was their hope and faith, whether the process be the strictest of disciplines or a riot of unfettered imaginings. And originality- discovering their own world in their own individual linguistic way- was their most fervent ambition. The motley of verbal visions they thus loosed on the world is like an extravagant circus- not only in its bizarre color and diversity, but in its quality too, with some acts extremely ingenious and accomplished, others strained and pointless. The new range of possibilities they introduced into literature is still providing ideas and material and inspiration for writers.

They explored points of view that were extremes of authorial disengagement and extremes of engagement; they experimented with new varieties of self-representation; they discovered unanticipated modes of self-reflexiveness. They structured literary works in a variety of new ways, from representing the flux of experience to representing its atomicity. They focused variously and radically on different elements of the literary work: on the image, the impression, the experienced event, the event's emotional impact, the locution or slogan, and even on the word or its implied semantic framework. They explored minimal means for producing precise effects, and maximal means for overwhelming all categories of relevance, for foregrounding everything. They pushed the limits of language, experimenting with syntax and antisyntax, with literalism, with abstraction, and with the pure objectivism of literature as words on a page. They concocted new representations of time- as process, as stasis, as recursion - and new versions of identity- in process, in milieu, in lingo.

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)

Whatever the extremes and vagaries of their individual approaches, they all seem agreed on the ultimate indescribability of reality; on the uselessness of rationalistic and conventional approaches to understanding and on the necessity for uncompromising candor and originality. Sometimes they're just *playing*, cavorting, self-demonstrating their play can destroy the official certification on conventional concepts as well as anything.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Apollonio, Umbro, *Futurist Manifestoes*, trans. Brain, Flint, Higgitt, and Tisdall , Viking, 1973

Butler, Christopher, *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe, 1900 - 1916*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994

Fry, Edward, *Cubism***,** London, England: Thames and Hudson, 1986

Kahnweiler, Daniel-Henry , *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949

Martin, Ronald E., *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge: Innovative Writing in the Age of Epistemology*, Duke University Press, 1991

MacGowan, Christopher J.*William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Backround.*Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984.

Perloff, Marjorie , *The Futurist Moment*, University of Chicago Press, 1986

Pultz, John and Scallen, Catherine B. , *Cubism and American Photography, 1910-1930* , Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1981

Spate, Virginia, *Orphism: The Evolution of Non-Figurative Painting in Paris*, 1910 – 1914, Oxford, Oxford, 1974

Tillyard, S.K.: *The Impact of Modernism 1900 – 1920*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998

BDD-A3687 © 2005 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:17 UTC)