

INSIDE-OUT: ASSUMPTIONS OF
'ENGLISH' MODERNISM IN THE
WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY, LONDON, 1914



Juliet Steyn

TO DEFINE INVOLVES making categories, which entails drawing boundaries and differentiating. In 1914, the Whitechapel Art Gallery organised an exhibition called 'Twentieth century art (a review of modern movements)'.¹ This, a pivotal exhibition, was part of the processes through and in which a specifically 'English' account of modernism was created and installed. Its aim was to map out the development of modern art and, indeed, it occurred at a moment when, as Charles Harrison has suggested, 'the mainstream practice of modern art was defined and entrenched in England'.² Definitions create identities and produce hierarchies.

This chapter, through a study of the exhibition 'Twentieth century art', will examine the institution of the Whitechapel Art Gallery and its role in the formation of an identity for English modernism. It will explore also a web of shifting discourses which themselves constructed, and were constructed by, cultural boundaries and hierarchies. Furthermore, it will argue that distinctive categories, which situated an *inside* and an *outside* of and for accounts of modern British art, were produced in the exhibition. Here attention will be drawn to the formation of yet another category which occupied a space which is *outside* even when *inside* – that occupied by the 'alienised'. The special display of works by Jewish artists, in 'Twentieth century art', curated by David Bomberg, was important. For there in that place, (*outside* the *inside*), differentiation occurred and hierarchies were negotiated. The exhibition staged and was framed by a double strategy which could function only through inclusions and exclusions which were themselves set in motion through the shadowy presences of the alienised. Finally, I will discuss ways in

which critics represented the exhibition and argue that these not only articulated and installed dominant definitions of modern art in Britain but also replicated social categories.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery has an institutional history of which it is also a product. It was opened on its present site in east London on 12 March 1901. The gallery was the outcome of twenty years of exhibitions organised in St Jude's School by Canon and Henrietta Barnett. These events attracted an increasing number of visitors, from 10,000 in 1881 to 55,300 in 1886.³ This success meant that extra space for exhibitions was needed. In 1897, Canon Barnett decided to purchase land to build, as he put it, 'a permanent Picture Gallery scheme'.⁴ Within two weeks he had raised the estimated £6,000 necessary for the project and commissioned the architect Charles Harrison Townsend – who had established a reputation as architect of the Bishopgate Institute (1894) – to design the building. The location chosen was next to the Passmore Edward's Library⁵ on Whitechapel High Street. The decision to build an art gallery next to a library was significant: their social roles were seen as compatible. It was considered that both provided the means for the social advancement of the working classes and for providing them with a respectable and sober form of recreation. Culture was intended to mould people: in the reproduction of social roles and in the productive processes.

By the late nineteenth century a transformation of the public and private spheres was occurring. Education, in a variety of sites, including the Whitechapel, strove to secure, sustain and legitimate itself as a 'body', and a 'voice' in the public domain. Art galleries were part of a larger project of social organisation and one in which culture was used to educate and morally uplift the public. Barnett saw 'art as a teacher' and pictures as 'preachers, as voices of God passing his lessons from age to age'. His language resonates with the zealotry of Christian socialism. Instruction through art, he believed, would lead to the improvement of the 'lower classes'. By teaching them to admire the beautiful, they would gain insights and understandings which would enable them to share the values of the classes above them. The gallery sought to inculcate in the local population a higher subjectivity which could transcend 'base nature' by offering experiences, feelings and pleasures that went beyond what were understood as the mindless routines of working-class lives. Furthermore, Barnett argued: 'There can be no real unity so long as people in different parts of a city are prevented from admiring the same things, from taking the same pride in their fathers' great deeds and from sharing the glory of possessing the same great literature.'⁶ Education and art were considered as foundations through which social problems would be ameliorated, a 'common' culture created, and 'one' nation produced.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery addressed itself to culturally differentiated communities: foreigners (the Irish, the Jew, etc.), outsiders (the working classes, women, etc.) who needed incorporating into the evolving idea of the nation state. It has been argued, notably by Philip Dodd, that the years 1880–1920 entailed the invention, transformation and remaking of English identity. Its successful creation was both predicated upon and nourished by the illusion that ‘everyone had a place . . . and had contributed to the past which had become a settled present’⁷ – while at the same time, as David Feldman suggests, practices that departed from or did not fit in with the evolving national pattern and ideas about one nation were construed and represented as alien.⁸ Increasingly since the 1880s, Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe were settling in east London, and the area of Whitechapel conveyed a sense of ‘race’, as well as class concentration. Indeed, for many contemporary observers the East End of London meant the Jewish East End. The Jews in Britain stood out as a disturbing alien presence who, it was thought,⁹ hindered the construction and consolidation of the nation. Their assimilation to, and dissimulation from, English middle-class values was the necessary complement to the definition of the dominant English. Jews were subjects of, and subject to, the programme of exhibitions, lectures and guided tours organised at the gallery.

The 1906 exhibition ‘Jewish art and antiquities’¹⁰ shaped a Jewish identity, in relation to the wider issue of making a common, national identity defined as English. It sought to teach the ‘foreign’ Jew to assimilate and, at one and the same time, reminded Jews and non-Jews alike that this process had already been accomplished. The version of ‘Jew’ offered by the exhibition or adduced by the catalogue was predicated upon particular notions of assimilation, middle-class moral values, high culture, judgements on class and – in the wake of anti-alien agitation, which led to a Royal Commission whose findings culminated in legislation to restrict immigration¹¹ – a defence against anti-Semitism.

The art history produced in the exhibition was that of the disinterested observer of ‘truth’. The question of the display, which included paintings, decorative art, synagogue ornaments and manuscripts gathered from western Europe, was the problem of representing history and reality. Empirical methods, derived from the natural sciences, structured the form of ‘Jewish art and antiquities’. Facts and ‘data’ were accumulated to give the exhibition the authority of science. The catalogue was at pains to point out that the show was not exhaustive or even representative in that it included just a few ‘specimens’. The word *specimens*, with its scientific connotations, reminded the viewer that, in spite of the miscellaneous collection of objects on view, the items served as evidence of greater ‘truths’. The chaos of miscellany was overcome

by the display of specimens. The exhibition ordered, channelled and constructed historical ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. It offered as truth the pretence that what was in reality an unceasing struggle over identity (Jewish and/or English) had already been settled, and offered a version of ‘Jew’ compatible with an English middle-class form of life and morality.

The social and ideological assumptions of the exhibition were legitimated by discourses which provided and articulated the ‘rules’ for what was to be apprehended as ‘reality’ and ‘truth’. The instituting discourse, the exhibition catalogue, was intended to be didactic. All catalogues at the Whitechapel, as the Trustees’ Report following the exhibition ‘Jewish art and antiquities’ explained, were to describe ‘the pictures in language which aimed at linking the subject to the experience of the visitors, and at assisting their judgement in appreciating the various merits.’¹² Yet, it seems from the tone of this Trustees’ Report that the value of art and the educative purposes of art exhibitions was not taken as given. The text is a defensive attempt to fend off anticipated criticisms. It suggests that the particular claims it wished to make, for the value and uses of art, needed after all to be established, argued and defended. The voice of the Report is assertive. Experience, it argued, had taught:

that with higher tastes people turn away from the things which make for poverty. A great love of beauty means, for instance, greater care for cleanliness, a better choice of pleasures, and increased self-respect. The use of the powers of admiration revealed new interests which are not satisfied in a public house but drives their possessors to do something both in their world and their play which adds to the joy of the earth. The sordid character of many national pleasures and the low artistic value of much of the national produce is due to the unused powers of admiration.¹³

The text opposed value to necessity. The need for ‘beauty’ was set against the need for ‘bread’. ‘Admiration’, which would transform individuals by leading them away from ‘base pleasures’ characterised as ‘sordid’, would be transmuted by the ‘powers of admiration’, as would the ‘national produce’. A choice was explicit: in this discourse high culture would rescue the masses from all forms of poverty – social, economic, moral, intellectual and spiritual. But perhaps the over-defensive tone signalled anxiety and suggests that the efficacy or viability of the strategy was in question. Certainly by the 1890s, as Gareth Stedman Jones suggests, institutions in the public sphere were changing their social roles. No longer were they seen as manor houses from which a new ‘squirarchy’ would lead the poor to virtue. They were increasingly perceived as ‘social laboratories’, where professional administrators could work out their new principles of social policy.¹⁴ Here political

exigencies were transformed into rational authority which itself was meant to represent the general interest. This was also the moment when, according to Harold Perkin, the political extension of citizenship to the whole community began the processes of 'differentiating professional society from its predecessors'.¹⁵

The Whitechapel Art Gallery was a late venture. It was itself caught in a conundrum articulated by incompatible discourses: philanthropy versus professionalism. Over the next years, and certainly by 1914 in the exhibition 'Twentieth century art', a shift of paradigm is evident. There can be witnessed a battle of competing discourses, trustees (for whom the gallery was still a philanthropic venture) against curators (for whom art was a discrete practice, with its own discourses which were to be legitimated by the expert administrator). The form of artistic re-evaluation signalled by the exhibition and its catalogue is significant and made all the more so given the particular history and ideology of the gallery.

The paradigmatic change was made explicit in the catalogue which accompanied the show. It started with a short essay to frame the exhibition and continued with a list of artists' names, lenders or the title of the work. Authorship and ownership were given priority. There was no additional amplification or elucidation of works. Implicit in this schema is the idea that knowledge springs directly from the objects themselves. The exhibition employed a modernist approach to art which has now become the familiar discourse of professional art historical management. Art history is presented as a seamless chronology. Art works were to be 'read' through the text 'artist' and/or through the notion of 'style'.

The story mounted by the catalogue sought to make connections across a diverse range of art through identifying their stylistic similarities. In 'Twentieth century art' a broad range of works, from Impressionist to Cubist and Futurist, was shown. Vanessa Bell, Henry Lamb, Gaudier-Brzeska, Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash and Wyndham Lewis were amongst those who had work on view. In addition a large collection from Roger Fry and the Omega Workshop was displayed.¹⁶ Separated from the rest and hung together in the Small Gallery were works by Jewish artists. A Jewish section within this exhibition did not, and indeed could not, conform to or fit in with the overall theme of the show with its aim to instate a modernist aesthetic into British art discourses. What bonded this section together was the Jewish origins of the participants. Fifty-three works by fifteen artists were displayed. These included Bomberg, Gertler, Kramer, Modigliani, Wolmer and Pascin.¹⁷ However, before we examine the significance of this section the parameters of the exhibition as a whole will be considered.

As mentioned earlier, correspondences between styles formed the basis for

categorising the works and indeed the rationale for the hanging. The show was divided into four main groups. The first group showed the influence of Walter Sickert and Lucien Pissarro on modern art and stressed their use of ordinary subjects which, it was argued, were treated in a 'luminous' manner; the second constructed links between Puvis de Chavannes, Alphonse Legros and Augustus John whose works were characterised by their persistent use of decorative design and linear simplifications in the treatment of human types; the text argued that a third group had a debt to Impressionist painting and to Cézanne and suggested further that this work differed from the previous group in its use of volumetric drawing and its abandoning of perspective. The final group was characterised as having given up representation almost entirely. This group, it was pointed out, had recently established a Rebel Art Centre. Though not displayed in this context, the works of Bomberg were mentioned in the catalogue as if included in this group. His paintings and drawings were to be found in the Small Gallery with the works of other Jewish artists.

As a whole, the exhibition was conceived as a follow-on to a show staged in the Whitechapel four years earlier, called 'Twenty years of British Art'.¹⁸ There, the intention had been to show what had happened in art since the 'absorbition' (*sic*) of the lessons of French Impressionism: 'The Twentieth Century Art exhibition is concerned with the progress of art since the absorption of the Impressionist teachings, as shown in the work of Younger British artists.'¹⁹ The 1910 exhibition was designed to show the impact on art of French Impressionism, which it considered to have moved art away from 'naturalism'. According to the 1914 catalogue the earlier exhibition had

showed that artists had moved away from an academic treatment of history, anecdote, and sentimentality, and had gone in search of a more brilliant treatment of light in landscape, and of more truly decorative treatments of subject, and of a more intimate treatment of human life generally.²⁰

Here the sketch is gaining priority over finished painting. Private expression is celebrated over academic skill, and French painting becomes the model for modern art. Explicit too is the notion of progress, which in art was taken to mean the assertion of the autonomy of aesthetic experience. Implicit also is the association of 'development' with an artistic language or style which now meant the avoidance of subjects which could be construed as morally charged. Moral incitements were being transmuted into progressive imperatives. Additionally, by creating a link between the two exhibitions, 'Twenty years of British art' and 'Twentieth century art', the notion of art as a continuously evolving process was installed.

The catalogue accompanying 'Twenty years of British art' did not have entries on each of the 569 items on display. It vacillated in its schema from one which would seem to let the art 'speak for itself' to another with an overtly didactic purpose. The commentary produced for *The convalescent* by Ambrose McEvoy is typical.

This modest picture is a remarkable example of the attainment of the harmony necessary to make a painting into a fine work of art. The simple lines of the bare room, the sober colour scheme of ivory and brown and dim red, the quiet light falling on the sofa and its occupant, all combine to carry forward the expression of a gentle, homely beauty.²¹

This caption shows a critical discourse now mediated through particular understandings of French art. The form and the design both articulate 'gentle, homely beauty' which together evoke a scene of calm and simple domesticity. The text links form and content to produce a message which celebrates and idealises the virtues of home. But above all, it is the achievement of a particular aesthetic quality, 'harmony', which secures this picture as a modern work of art.

An uncharacteristically lengthy entry on Tonks's *Rosamund and the purple jar* (fig. 11.1) spells out the ways in which modern art was understood to be different and superior to Pre-Raphaelite art.

Behind the work of the artist here one feels a wider culture, a mind that knows childish things for what they are. He can delight in them, and, when his theme, as here, enjoins, revel in their charm, but we feel that he can also put childish things away. He does not labour under the illusion, natural and even praiseworthy as it was in the case of the Pre-Raphaelites, that the only way of art lies in childish methods.²²

The differences produced in and by the text between Tonks's picture and a Pre-Raphaelite painting established the ground for differentiating and classifying modern art. In this discourse modern painting is interpreted as more knowing, more intelligent, more discerning in concept and in the handling of paint. Modern art is produced as superior in so far as it demonstrates a greater understanding of the methods and procedures of art. Judgements on art are to be made in terms deemed intrinsic to art itself. Through this form of critical re-evaluation, the role of art and the artist's moral responsibility is redefined: modern art is identified and made.

'Twenty years of British art' was part of a process whereby the idea of art as a distinct culture demanding recondite knowledge was being formulated, articulated and promoted. The primary concern of art was to be aesthetic, and art history and criticism were constructed around the artist and his (*sic*) stylistic precedents. Or as the catalogue put it:



11.1 Henry Tonks, *Rosamund and the purple jar*, oil on canvas, 52.7×37.4 cm.
Tate Gallery, London

A feeling common to the painters, sculptors, and designers represented in the exhibition is that of a compulsion on the artist towards a more personal statement of his relation towards his subject in particular and to life in general than has been expressed in the preceding phases of the development of art.²³

The role of art is given a new formulation. The responsibility of art is re-described through a notion of 'artist' whose work must be authentic (personal). The 'moderns' were drawing up a hermetically sealed account of art which increasingly becomes the domain of the 'expert', the professional curator and administrator of art.

In 1912 contemporary artistic theory had been polarised by the London launch of Post-Impressionism. The Royal Academy, attempting to maintain its prestige and power, closed rank against 'modern' art. The plutocratic regime of the Royal Academy was defending its own system of private commissions against the private galleries and market forces. These social and economic exigencies were transmuted into aesthetic debates, in which Post-Impressionism, through Fry's and Bell's aesthetic theory, was constructed as progressive (modern) and defined in opposition to the values of the Royal Academy in Piccadilly which were represented as reactionary.

By pitting the one institution against the other, the critics of *The Times* and *The Observer* recreated those polemics in the reviews of "Twentieth century art". *The Times* asserted:

This exhibition in Whitechapel seems like a challenge to the other in Piccadilly. The Piccadilly artists would say, no doubt, that Whitechapel is the proper place for it and Billingsgate the proper language. Art, like life, is at any rate more exciting in Whitechapel than in Piccadilly. Something is happening there and nothing at all at Burlington House.²⁴

Through the nature of the exhibition 'Twentieth century art', the Whitechapel presented a challenge to the prestige of the Royal Academy. The values espoused by the Royal Academy served as a negative foil against which 'progressive' or 'advanced' art could be assessed and measured. In these discourses, the Whitechapel represented the modern, progressive culture of the market economy and the administrative state.

For *The Observer* the exclusion of works by Royal Academicians was at least as worthy of comment, as significant, as those works which were included in the show:

There is scarcely an exhibitor at the Whitechapel who is represented at the Royal Academy. We are thus faced with the remarkable fact that the official guardians of the nation's art, the members of the Royal Academy, refuse to take any account of the vast movement, or succession of movements, which have led twentieth century art into new paths, and, on the other hand what pretends to

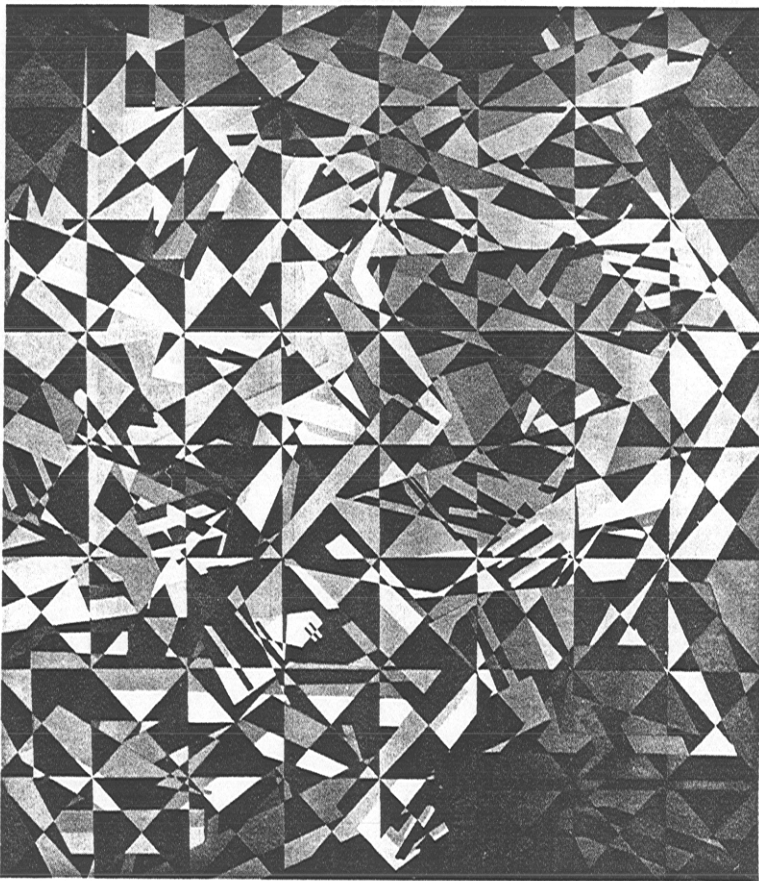
a representative exhibition of twentieth century art, organized by laymen who have no axe to grind and who have on previous occasions given proof of their liberal spirit, absolutely ignores the existence of the Royal Academy.²⁵

A metaphorical battle – East versus West; administrative versus plutocratic culture; commissions versus market forces; progressive versus reactionary – was here being played out.

'Twentieth century art' was selected by the gallery director, Gilbert Ramsey, with the help of the previous director Charles Aitken who, in 1911, had been appointed director of the Tate Gallery. They had asked permission of one of the Trustees, William Dawson, to dispense with the usual practice of setting up an advisory committee for the exhibition. In a letter dated 5 February 1914 Dawson acceded to this request with the proviso that: 'we shall not have many examples of the "Cubist" and "Futurist" school, though perhaps we should have one or two as an example of what certain members of the public can be induced to tolerate.'²⁶ To whom was he referring? Whatever may be postulated as an answer to this question, Dawson's fears seem to have been well founded. The *Daily Express* asked what would be the consequences should 'a whole flood of *isms* be let loose like a cataract on the unprepared East End?'²⁷ The director of the National Gallery, J. B. Manson, had written to Ramsay expressing his disquiet at the decision to include Cubist works in the exhibition.²⁸ On 15 May Dawson, in response to a letter from the chair of trustees of the Whitechapel, The Hon. Harry Lawson, MP, which alerted him to an article in the *Telegraph* by Sir Claude Phillips, agreed with the view that the trustees: 'assume a grave responsibility in opening the doors of such an exhibition without careful preparation and warning to the artistic youth and larger public of East London.'²⁹ Thus for the trustees, if not the curators themselves, a paternalistic role for art exhibitions was still on the agenda. But if this entailed the 'careful preparation' of the public, many of the critics appear to have been ill-prepared for the exhibition.

*The Star*³⁰ began its review with a critique of the title of the show. The critic castigated the organisers for creating expectations which were misleading. Furthermore, the exhibition was 'bewildering'. *The Standard* saw it as an insane attempt to present a complete review of the whole evolution of modern art. Bomberg's *In the hold* (fig. 11.2), *Ezekiel* and *Racehorses* were singled out for comment.³¹

Moreover, a number of other newspaper reports completely misrepresented the exhibition. Out of 494 exhibits, a total of thirteen – by Nevinson, Roberts, Wadsworth, Etchells and Wyndham Lewis – could be described as Cubist or Futurist. Nevertheless, the headline in *The Observer* ran 'Futurist art in Whitechapel'³² and a notice appeared in the *Daily Express*³³ under the title 'Futurist picture show'.



11.2 David Bomberg, *In the hold*, oil on canvas, 196.2 × 231.1 cm. Tate Gallery, London

The *Manchester Guardian* suggested that all Jewish artists were Cubists: 'The little gallery at Whitechapel is always made a particular feature of in these exhibitions. This year it will house the younger Jewish artists with Mr. Bomberg and other cubists as the nucleus.'¹⁴ Yet Bomberg was the only artist in the Jewish section whose work could have been characterised in that manner. The way in which the press dealt with Cubism and Futurism served to associate those forms of modernism with Jewish artists. Or, if not with the Jews then with foreign or malign influences.

The message of *The Westminster Gazette* was as clear as a bell: modern art was infected by foreign influence. Commenting upon the works of Duncan Grant the reviewer argued: '[Grant] has surrendered the gift which enabled him to paint a picture so beautiful as the "Lemon Gatherers" for an apprenticeship in cabalistic decoration.'¹⁵ The force of the reference to the Cabala is to intensify a specifically Jewish connotation, and in this case and this context suggests the idea of an occult, irrational world where reason has been lost. The language is emotive. The idea of Grant 'surrendering' his talent evokes the sense of the artist losing himself to an outside alien force. He is seduced by an evil influence (modern art). But the text goes on to argue that Grant could save himself through applying reason.

According to *The Westminster Gazette*, William Roberts was also in grave danger: he had overdosed on modernism. However, the text argued – following the rationale of the catalogue – that if an evolution such as Cubism was legitimately worked out, this evil influence need not be serious. None the less the article continued with further reproaches: 'and soon the individual artist finds himself out of sympathy with the Academy, yet believes that the language of art is a common speech based upon representation of reality, will be forced for his own life's sake to subscribe to a movement as to a trade union.'¹⁶ Here, modern art is equated with trade union politics. And the power of this particular association also served to suggest that personal or artistic freedom is at stake. Artistic integrity and political conformity were posed in opposition. In this discourse, progressive art becomes unfree.

Whilst the catalogue argued that the development of modern art was evolutionary, the press tended to depict its nature as revolutionary. The term *revolutionary* had, by this moment, acquired quite particular meanings. It was represented in opposition to evolution. The former connoted violent change and the latter a planned or 'natural' transition. Charles Harrison¹⁷ has traced the use of 'revolutionary' in the context of art to an article dating from 1910, by Frank Rutter. The article was a defence of Post-Impressionism. Certainly by 1914, if the reviews of the 'Twentieth century art' exhibition are anything to go by, it was seized upon with alacrity. Doubtless, as Harrison also argues, 'revolutionary art' was not then a term applied casually.

The review in *The Star* displayed anxiety about thinking calmly and constructively about these 'artistic revolutionaries'.¹⁸ Moreover, the *Observer*¹⁹ described the exhibition as representing a revolutionary movement and again, taking up the theme in institutional terms, argued that the exhibition undermined and threatened the position of the Royal Academy. The text continued, commenting on Bomberg's *In the hold*, in the following terms: 'Here one young fellow with artistic if rebellious instincts exclaimed – I'm going home to buy a penny box of paints and do some of those pictures myself. That's what I'm going

to do.' Here two points were made: firstly, it is a rebellious young man who is drawn to modern art; and secondly, modernism invites the uneducated or unsophisticated to enjoy it. Rebelliousness and ignorance are represented as if inherent to the apprehension and appreciation of modernism.

*The Morning Post*⁴⁰ made an oblique, though immediately recognisable, reference to the Jewish East End. 'The Commercial Road ought to test their appeal to the love of bright colour an implicit grotesque humour, and the like.' The Commercial Road connoted 'Jewish' in terms of locality and – perhaps – also through the identification of Jews with commerce. Additionally, the love of bright colour suggested a lack of sophisticated taste and restraint, as indeed did the idea of 'grotesque' humour. This characterisation suggests children or 'primitive' peoples. In the art discourses of the time, 'primitive' was used to connote nature, truth and sincerity or to signify the barbaric and uncivilised. For a traveller in unknown London, like Charles Booth, the working classes had been perceived as leading lives which were understood as congruent with their physical nature: 'I see nothing improbable in the general view that the simple natural lives of working class people tend to their own and their children's happiness more than the artificial complicated existence of the rich.'⁴¹ If working-class life was seen as uncomplicated or simple in contrast with the complexity of the life of the rich, it was also seen as more authentic, as more real. Indeed Mark Gertler, in a letter to Brett dated January 1914, appears to have shared this view: 'I was extremely fortunate to live in the East End amongst real people.'⁴² A month before in a letter to Carrington, he had elaborated this notion in aesthetic terms:

As for realism – my work is real and I wanted it to be real. The more I see of life, the more I get to think that realism is necessary . . . I was born from a working man. I haven't had a grand education and I don't understand all this abstract intellectual nonsense! I am rather in search of reality.⁴³

His text was both a celebration of the 'authenticity' of Jewish working-class life and a defensive attempt to ward off criticisms of it. Indeed, if the lives and experiences of East Enders were deemed to be direct, unmeditated and natural, according to *The Morning Post*,⁴⁴ they could be expected to find pleasure in an art which was bold, bright in colour, emotionally simple and closer to nature. By inference this was an art devoid of skill, elegance or refinement. It was 'primitive'. And again it was Bomberg's work that was used to exemplify these traits.

The apparently anecdotal account of *The Morning Post* described the gallery as half filled with children, some brought in by parents. 'Stout, foreign mothers and dark sometimes ragged fathers.' These people were not just poor but alien too. *The Standard*⁴⁵ also suggested that children and foreigners could

understand these 'puzzle' paintings. Once more, it was Bomberg's work – *In the hold*, *Ezekiel* and *Racehorses* – which served as examples. *The Daily Telegraph* review explicitly mentioned the Jewish section: 'The small room contains a good collection from the brushes of Jewish painters. There are also a great many subjects that will appeal to children.'⁴⁶ Again the reference was to associate children and Jews.

The critical reception of the show created a version of modernism which it explicitly associated with evil. It constructed this modernism as repressive, as working against the freedom of the individual artist. It both linked modernism with revolution and trivialised revolutionary politics by characterising them as childish and unsophisticated. In short, this chain of associations and complicities anchored modernism to subversive, foreign, Jewish influences.

It is puzzling, given the anxieties voiced during the planning phase of the exhibition, as to what were the motives which led to the creation of a special display of work by Jewish artists. It is even more perplexing since this display did not fit with the overall theme and conception of the show. Its inclusion can be explained by local interests, that is to say, the Jewish constituency that the trustees of the Whitechapel sought to educate. But if the curators were intending to appease the trustees, then they failed to do so. William Dawson declared that the exhibition was 'a responsibility which I was not personally prepared to incur'.⁴⁷ And, if the special section of art by Jews had been devised to appeal to East End Jews in order to show to them and to others the success story of assimilated Jewry and its cultural achievements, it was a strategy which clearly backfired, as it was bound to do. To hang the works separately was a deeply ambiguous act; whilst they were in a position to be celebrated, they were also open to being reviled.

Judgements on art do not exist apart from the normative values of society. And for the press which produces and constructs, as well as mediating these values, the exhibition served to reinforce the myth of the Jew as a 'foreigner in our midst'. The hanging of the exhibition can be read as resonant with Simmel's idea of Jews as the very epitome of *strangers* – always on the *outside* even when *inside*.⁴⁸ Zygmunt Bauman has taken up this theme more recently in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, suggesting: 'The objects of anti-semitism occupy as a rule the semantically confusing and psychologically unnerving status of foreigners inside.'⁴⁹ Moreover, as the words of Edouard Drumont (a French MP and a noted anti-semite) suggest, the very absence of solid boundaries between hitherto separate groups could in itself be the cause of confusion and lead to fear and resentment. He wrote, 'A Mr. Cohen who goes to synagogue, who keeps kosher is a respectable person. I don't hold anything against him. I do have it in for the Jew who is not obvious.'⁵⁰ So even

the fact that some Jews assimilated was used against them by anti-semitic theorists. Their presence, now articulated as the not-quite-identical was a distorted, displaced image of themselves. Ambivalence moves to menace. No doubt, had the Jews not consented to assimilate they would also have been blamed for anti-semitism.

The liberal compromise had offered emancipation to the Jews in the expectation that they would move closer to British society. In this discourse it was argued that anti-semitism would only end when society tolerated the Jews, and this meant their assimilation. But this liberal creed allowed no place in society for Others. In Hannah Arendt's sharp words: 'Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness there was no escape.'⁵¹ Equality of conditions, though certainly a basic requirement for justice, is nevertheless among the greatest and most uncertain ventures of modern society. The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that exist between people; and thus all the more unequal do individuals and groups of people become. Modernity was, as Bauman argued, simultaneously bringing about the levelling of differences and again creating boundaries and structuring further differences.

Under conditions of modernity, segregation required a modern method of boundary building. A method able to withstand and neutralize the levelling impact of allegedly infinite powers of educatory and civilizing forces; a method capable of designating a 'no-go' area for pedagogy and self-improvement, of drawing an unencroachable limit to the potential of cultivation (a method applied eagerly, though with mixed success, to all groups intended to be kept permanently in a subordinate position – like the working classes or women). If it was to be salvaged from the assault of modern equality, *the distinctiveness of the Jews had to be re-articulated.*⁵² [author's emphasis]

The Jews just did not fit in. But, paradoxically, that was their place. For although the category 'Jew' was ambivalent, there was no escape from it. Jews filled out and occupied the symbolically important place as *Other*. Cultural identity is always inseparable from the creation of boundaries. Furthermore, the cultural order is always constituted around the figures at its territorial edge which structure the relationships of *superior* and *inferior*. In Britain, Jews were installed at the extreme edge of social relations as *Others*, whereby they occupied both a cognitive and socio-economic position which secured and maintained them as different, distinctive and inferior. Correspondingly, in the exhibition 'Twentieth century art' the works by Jewish artists were constructed as *Other*. The terrain they occupied was literally and metaphorically *outside* the *inside* of modern art practices as they were being formulated in the exhibition.

In an argument which draws upon the work of Raymond Williams, Peter

Stallybrass and Allon White argue that a culture which is 'inherently domineering' (that is to say, constructed in a mode inclined towards domination), has access to power and prestige which enables it to create the definitions which come to dominate and form the *outside* and *inside*.⁵³ They continue:

Bourgeois democracy emerged with a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manner, morals and imaginative writings, in its body bearing and taste, a subliminal elitism which was constitutive of its historical being. Whatever, the radical nature of its 'universal' democratic demand, it had engraved in its subjective identity all the means by which it felt itself to be a different distinctive and superior class.⁵⁴

The democratic aims embedded in the particular aims of the 'Twentieth century art' exhibition were spelled out clearly in the accompanying catalogue which the authors ended with the following plea: 'They hope that all who are in sympathy with their conscious effort to introduce art to democracy will aid them in their endeavour to show that democratic feeling has been introduced in art.'⁵⁵ Democracy refers to an idea of open argument and equality amongst people who are all deserving of respect. But, as the press make plain, the aspiration to 'equality in difference' cannot stand up. It can only serve as an ideology of domination whose goal it is to hide that domination. The notion of rights in bourgeois democracy failed to erase Jew-as-other because the administrative state was based on a misrecognition of the relations of power in institutions and discourses through which social relations are mediated and regulated.

In its effects, the exhibition was to provoke and expose tensions between cultural differentiation and the formation of a national culture, and between cultural particularism and the totalising ambitions of the nation state. Nationalism depended increasingly for its definitions on criteria which were 'cultural', argues James Snead.⁵⁶ It was possible to classify national cultures through one culture projecting an image of its difference from another. In this way, superiority, deemed to be both natural and national, was established. Snead continues with reference to an argument mounted by Sigmund Freud in which Freud had opined:

Closely related races keep one another at arm's length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese. We are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured. In the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do we may recognize the expression of self-love – of narcissism.⁵⁷

We are in the unstable world of projection. When faced with non-British culture (and in particular the work displayed in the exhibition as Jewish art), the press, insensitive to nuances of desire, inevitably re-articulated difference to represent an inferior category: a modernism associated with subversion, foreignness, Jewishness. Modern art was here associated with malign influences. Some critics, seemingly blinded by fear, went so far as to explicitly connect Cubism and Futurism with Jewish artists. Furthermore, as we have seen, modern art was seen as part of the occult, irrational world of the *Other*, constructed as an alien force with an evil influence. But this art could be distinguished from another modernism, a superior modernism, which celebrated the notion of the purity of artistic expression. This was a modernism which could be legitimated as a democratic, progressive form of art. A version of modernism which sought to banish from the discourses of art, social, political, symbolic or ideological judgements, was being created. A place was made for art in which its ultimate value is 'aesthetic'. And aesthetic in a particular sense: one which banishes from its discourse any other deemed extrinsic to its own fantasy of purity.

The Whitechapel Gallery participated in the articulation, negotiation and administration of cultural identities national and/or *Other*. The chimerical place of the alienised was essential for the construction and articulation of the identity of a distinctively English account of modernism. No longer tempted to transgress, the modernism of British culture was rendered, for a moment at least, safe and pure, within such territorial pickets.

Notes

This text is an elaboration of an earlier article, 'Yids, mods and foreigners', published in *Third text*, XV, summer 1991. I am grateful to Andrew Brighton for his insightful comments which provoked me to rethink it and enabled another text to emerge and to Richard Appignanesi for generously giving his time proof-reading the text, for his helpful comments and encouragement.

- 1 'Twentieth century art (a review of modern movements)', summer exhibition, 1914, Whitechapel Art Gallery. The exhibition was from 8 May to 20 June and was open to visitors each day from 12 noon to 9.30 p.m.
- 2 Charles Harrison, 'Critical theories and the practice of art', in Susan Compton, ed., *British art in the twentieth century*, Royal Academy, London, 1986, p. 55.
- 3 Henrietta Barnett, *Canon Barnett: his life and work*, vol. II, London, 1918, p. 55.
- 4 *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 154.
- 5 John Passmore Edwards was Liberal MP for Salisbury 1880–5. He gave grants of money to boroughs on the basis that libraries would be established.
- 6 S. and H. Barnett, 'Class divisions in great cities', in *Towards social reform*, London, 1909, cited in Frances Borzello, *Civilising caliban: The misuse of art 1875–1980*, Routledge, London, 1987, p. 32.

- 7 Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and national culture', in Philip Dodd and Robert Colls, *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920*, Croom Helm, London, 1987, p. 22.
- 8 David Feldman, 'The importance of being English: Jewish immigration and the decay of liberal England', in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds, *Metropolis London*, Routledge, London, 1989, *passim*.
- 9 See the Evidence taken by the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration cd. 1742, vol. II, 1903.
- 10 See Juliet Steyn, 'The complexities of assimilation in the exhibition 'Jewish art and antiquities' in the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1906', *Oxford Art Journal*, 13:2, 1990.
- 11 Royal Commission on Alien Immigration, I, Report cd. 1742, 1903. The Bill was passed in 1905 and reached the statute books in 1906.
- 12 Trustees' Report, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1907, p. 3.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 14 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: a study in the relationship between the classes in Victorian society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 328.
- 15 Harold Perkin, *The rise of professional society: England since 1880*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 9.
- 16 These works, listed in the catalogue nos 36–115, were all on sale. They included furniture and decorative items.
- 17 Fifty-three works by the following fifteen artists were shown: David Bomberg, Moses Kisling, Mark Gertler, Horris Brodsky, Isaac Rosenberg, Bernard Meninsky, Alfred Wolmark, Hubert Schloss, Morris Goldstein, Eli Nadelman, Pascin, Modigliani, Mark Wiener, Jacob Kramer and Clara Bernberg.
- 18 Twenty years of British art (1890–1910)', summer exhibition, Whitechapel, 1910.
- 19 'Introduction', 'Twentieth century art', catalogue, p. 3.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 21 'Twenty years of British art', catalogue, p. 21.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 24 Anon., 'Challenge of Whitechapel to Piccadilly: an exhibition in the East', *The Times*, 8 May 1914, Whitechapel Art Gallery archive. All press clippings have been taken from this archive and are unpaginated.
- 25 Anon., 'Twentieth century art at Whitechapel', *The Observer*, 17 May 1914.
- 26 Letter from William Dawson to Gilbert Ramsey, dated 5 February 1914, Whitechapel Gallery Archive.
- 27 P. K. G., 'Side-splitting-art', *Daily Express*, 8 May 1914.
- 28 Letter from J. B. Manson to Gilbert Ramsey, Whitechapel Art Gallery.
- 29 Letter from W. Dawson to The Hon. Harry Lawson, MP, dated 15 May 1914.
- 30 A. J. Finberg, 'The Whitechapel Art Gallery', *The Star*, 20 May 1914.
- 31 Anon., 'Cubists in East-End; picture-puzzles to be seen in Whitechapel', *The Standard*, 14 May 1914.
- 32 Anon., 'East End critics: Futurist art in Whitechapel', *The Observer*, 10 May 1914.

- 33 Anon., *Daily Express*, 11 May 1914.
- 34 Anon., 'Post-Impressionists for Whitechapel', *Manchester Guardian*, 9 April 1914.
- 35 J. M. M., 'Twentieth-century art', *The Westminster Gazette*, 21 May 1914.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Charles Harrison, *English art and modernism 1900–1939*, Allen Lane, London, 1988, p. 75.
- 38 Finberg, *The Star*, 20 May 1914.
- 39 *The Observer*, 10 May 1914.
- 40 Anon., 'Whitechapel Gallery', *The Morning Post*, 11 May 1914.
- 41 Charles Booth, *The life and labour of the People in London*, cited in Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and the national culture', p. 9.
- 42 Letter from Mark Gertler to the Hon. Dorothy Brett dated January 1914, Mark Gertler, *Selected letters*, ed. Noel Carrington, Rupert Hart-David, London, 1965, p. 63.
- 43 Letter from Mark Gertler to Carrington dated Sunday (December 1913), *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- 44 *The Morning Post*, 11 May 1914.
- 45 *The Standard*, 15 May 1914.
- 46 Anon., '20th century art: Whitechapel exhibition', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 1914.
- 47 Letter from W. Dawson to the Hon. Harry Lawson, MP, *op. cit.*
- 48 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 53.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 50 Drumont cited by Patrick Girard, 'Historical foundations of antisemitism', in Joel E. Dinsdale, ed., *Survivors, victims and perpetrators: essays on the Nazi Holocaust*, Washington, 1980, pp. 70–1, cited in Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 58.
- 51 H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1958, p. 87.
- 52 Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 59.
- 53 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The politics and poetics of transgression*, Methuen, London, 1986.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 55 'Twentieth century art', catalogue, p. 5.
- 56 James Snead, 'European pedigrees/African contagious: nationality, narrative, and communality in Tutuola, Achebe, and Reed', in H. K. Bhabha, *Nation and narration*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 235.
- 57 Sigmund Freud, 'Group psychology', *Civilization, society and religion*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 131.

THE FRIGHTENING FREEDOM OF THE BRUSH:
THE BOSTON INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY
ART AND MODERN ART



Serge Guilbaut

IN THE LATE 1940S during the first stages of the cold war, freedom of experimentation was automatically equated in certain quarters with liberal freedom and in opposition to totalitarianism. Any attempt to curtail the artist's freedom of expression was seen as tantamount to treason. When America was trying to lead the western world in a crusade against totalitarianism, American culture itself had to reject isolationism and Americanism for a liberal international language. Liberals who refused to see art production in political terms were bound to make serious mistakes in this new, Manichean, international postwar world.

It is against this backdrop that the controversy surrounding the 1948 publication of the ICA manifesto, *'Modern art' and the American public*, should be seen and understood, if one wants to make sense of the hysterical response it generated.

The 'Boston affair' developed in a very volatile historically painful moment for the United States during which a total reorganisation of American culture was attempted by a liberal elite who understood the importance of modern culture in the symbolic struggle with Russia for world hegemony during the cold war.

The 'Boston affair', starting with the publication in February 1948 of a manifesto by the Boston Institute of Modern Art, was a response to this complex political situation, as well as an attempt to define the Institute's position on the general reorganisation of American culture after the Second World War.

In February, the Boston Institute of Modern Art, which had been established in 1936 as a branch of the Museum of Modern Art of New York, decided to