Real Spaces

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Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism, David Summers, Phaidon Press, London/New York, 2003, 704pp, 343 b/w illus, hb, £49.95, 0 7148 4244 3.

Emerging in the wake of the now long-standing, but still contentious, debates over the direction of art history as a discipline (today equally challenged by the 'subversive' notion of visual culture) is David Summers' vast and sprawling new book *Real Spaces*. Here the author presents the case for his own different methodology which examines artworks primarily in terms of their spatial attributes and social functions throughout the course of history: 'The change from visual to spatial arts means that artefacts, rather than being essentially formal or pictorial syntheses, are articulations and constructions of real spaces, and thus of meanings only statable in real spaces. Works of art are achieved not just in imagination but among real forms made integral with human uses.'

Summers' stated approach in *Real Spaces* is unorthodox in the manner in which he chooses to disregard many formal and iconographical principles which have been mainstays of traditional art history. Summers attempts instead to write an honest consideration of connections between diverse cultural traditions within a broad range of categories as described in the titles of the volume's seven lengthy chapters: Facture; Places; the Appropriation of the Centre; Images; Planarity; Virtuality, and the Conditions of Modernism.

Summers, professor of art history at the University of Virginia, is well known for his previous scholarly projects both on the work of Michelangelo (*Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 1981) and the history of ideas (*The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*, 1987). His writing is often characterised by its manifold references to philosophy and mythology, and in addition the author frequently explores both the complex etymologies of significant terms and the underexamined genealogies leading to many intellectual assumptions. If this sounds rather labyrinthine and occasionally arcane, it should. In stark contrast to the current era of dumbed-down and politically correct(ed) textbooks, Summers here weaves an intricate array of intellectual arguments around some essential landmarks of art history.

Summers' overall thesis comprises several components under the heading of 'real space'. He asserts that the acknowledgement of real space and the spatial arts should supersede an outdated formalist reading of the visual arts. If all art is considered spatial, this becomes manifest within: the real space of sculpture – often relating directly to the immediate bodily space of the viewer – the social space of an architectural setting, and the virtual space of drawn, painted and other graphic representations. In place of formal or iconographic analysis, Summers advocates describing the conditions of presentation of any given work, artefact, or monument. That is, the actual surfaces upon which imagery is created and subsequently disseminated into the culture. Summers privileges the way in which artworks are used, how they are fabricated, and how they relate to previous and later works in terms of both superficial and deeper resemblances.

Stylistically, the book is dense and slow-moving, as Summers relates his insights at a ponderous, unhurried pace. It is at times frustrating to confront the sheer mass of material presented in *Real Spaces*. Moreover Summers is generally more successful in building his arguments in the direction of Modernism, than when he ultimately addresses the period itself in the volume's concluding chapter. Summers defines the basis of the modern world via the term 'metaopticality': 'If the universe is defined as visible, that is, in terms of the active economy of light, then the notional framework – a universal grid ... is metaoptical.' This static, unyielding grid is then interrupted by the temporal, or as Summers puts it, 'the replacement of a world of forms by a world of force'. The author proceeds on a linear trajectory offering comments on Cézanne, Tatlin, and finally the Rothko Chapel in Houston Texas, which 'repeats an ancient circumambulatory form, but it is the paintings that alternate circumambulation. There is no relic, no stone, no centre.'

While this particular intersection between architectural/social and painted/virtual space is a relevant example of art displayed in explicitly spatial terms, one again begins to suspect that Rothko's work is so alluring as a monument to High Modernism (cue music) because it is so fundamentally resistant to explanation. (Interestingly enough, just as Summers' book ends with the Rothko Chapel, so James Elkins' recent *Pictures and Tears* (2001) begins with an extended analysis of the same subject.)

Modernism is almost treated cursorily, as a mere footnote after painstaking discussions of many pre-Modern topics (Aztec carvings, the city of Jerusalem, votive images, upright stones, etc) and often this section seems to pale in comparison to the descriptive richness found in earlier sections of the book. In particularly anti-climactic fashion, after The Rothko Chapel and Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* we are shown an environmental work by the little-known American artist William Bennett. If this is what Summers describes as 'more nearly contemporary' the effect is desultory. Yet one can without doubt state that *Real Spaces* is a clearly Post-modern work, as such an expansive text which tries to take into account cultural difference and heterogeneity would not (and could not) have been written decades ago (although one might note that Summers has been working on the book since 1987). In effect Summers' presentation offers the antithesis of Michel Foucault's renowned emphasis upon epistemological breaks, as he evokes a panoramic continuum of creative 'continuities and patterns' across history.

The author does maintain a somewhat peculiar habit of veering from the expected and already known (to an extent understandable given the scope of the text) to a number of incisive passages which sum up centuries of intellectual history in a concrete, almost matter-of-fact way. The author states that the sublime becomes the 'characteristic aesthetic category of the modern world', and in tracing this concept he writes: '[third-century Greek rhetorical writer] Longinus argued that the purpose of the sublime style was not to convince but to persuade through 'transport' (*ekstasis*) so that listeners are carried away in spite of themselves. This ekstasis is the experience of the marvellous, thauma, "wonder". From antiquity, machines were defined not only in practical terms but in their capacity to induce thauma, making us see effects the causes of which we cannot comprehend. In that respect machines provide a paradigm for the effect of artistic skill in general.' So that's why young Andrew Warhola longed to become a machine!

However a central question raised by this text pertains to audience. Who will ultimately be the reader of this ambitious book, weighing in at about two kilograms, and featuring an austere and restrained monochromatic design (especially by Phaidon Press standards)? Perhaps this will be a helpful guide either for the interested general reader on art (if such beings exist and I certainly hope that they do) or for the art professional who seeks a more inclusive text in terms of portraying and relating the past. One can learn much from selected portions of *Real Spaces*, even if taken as a whole it remains a disconcertingly rambling and idiosyncratic piece of scholarship. ▮

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