

→ INTRODUCING

POST- MODERN -ISM

A GRAPHIC GUIDE



RICHARD APPIGNANESI & CHRIS GARRATT
with ZIAUDDIN SARDAR & PATRICK CURRY

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POSTMODERNISM

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with **ZIAUDDIN SARDAR & PATRICK CURRY**



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The origins of 'postmodernism'

Sir, - The first use of the term "postmodernism" (Letters, February 19) is before 1926, and extends to the 1870s, when it was used by the British artist John Watkins Chapman, and 1917 when used by Rudolf Pannwitz. "Post-Impressionism" (1880s) and "post-industrial" (1914-22) were the beginning of the "posties", which flowered intermittently in the early 1960s in literature, social thought, economics and even religion ("Post-Christianity"). "Posteriority", the negative feeling of coming after a creative age or, conversely, the positive feeling of transcending a negative ideology, really develops in the 1970s, in architecture and literature, two centres of the post-modern debate (hyphenated half the time to indicate autonomy and a positive, constructive movement). "Deconstructive postmodernism" comes to the fore after the French post-structuralists (Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard) became accepted in the United States in the late 1970s, and now half the academic world believes postmodernism is confined to negative dialectics and deconstruction. But in the 1980s a series of new, creative movements occurred, variously called "constructive", "ecological", "grounded", and "restructive" post-modernism.

It is clear that two basic movements exist, as well as "the postmodern condition", "reactionary postmodernism" and "consumer postmodernism"; for example, the information age, the Pope, and Madonna. If one wants an impartial, scholarly guide to all this, Margaret Rose's *The Post-Modern and the Post-Industrial: A critical analysis*, 1991, serves very well.

I should add that one of the great strengths of the word, and the concept, and why it will be around for another hundred years, is that it is carefully suggestive about our having gone beyond the world-view of modernism - which is clearly inadequate - without specifying where we are going. That is why most people will spontaneously use it, as if for the first time. But since "Modernism" was coined apparently in the Third Century, perhaps its first use was then.

CHARLES JENCKS
London

Charles Jencks, an authority on postmodern architecture and art, provides a useful scanning of the term **postmodern**. But what does it mean in practice? Does "postmodern" accurately sum up the story of what we are present? Or is it just a fashionable term that leaves us unenlightened about our true historical condition?

First, let's consider the WORD...

What do you mean postmodern? The confusion is advertised by the “post” prefixed to “modern”. Postmodernism identifies itself by something it isn't. It isn't modern anymore. But in what sense exactly is it **post**...

- as a **result** of modernism?
- the **aftermath** of modernism?
- the **afterbirth** of modernism?
- the **development** of modernism?
- the **denial** of modernism?
- the **rejection** of modernism?

Postmodern has been used in a mix-and-match of some or all of these meanings. Postmodernism is a confusion of meanings stemming from two riddles...

- it resists and obscures the **sense** of modernism
- it implies a complete knowledge of the modern which has been surpassed by a **new age**.

A new age? An age, any age, is defined by the evidence of historic changes in the way we **see, think** and **produce**. We can identify these changes as belonging to the spheres of **art, theory** and **economic history**, and explore them for a practical definition of postmodernism.

Let's begin with art by tracing the **genealogy of postmodern art**.

PART ONE: THE GENEALOGY OF POSTMODERN ART

We could begin by visiting an installation by the Conceptual artist Daniel Buren (b.1939), entitled **O** **two levels with two colours** (1976), which features a vertically striped band at the floor levels of two adjoining gallery rooms, one at a step up from the other. Empty rooms, nothing else...



Buren's installation is not necessarily a representative example of art in the postmodern age. But it is a good place to start from, in the sense of where modernism itself has **arrived at** through a persistent history of innovation.

What's Modern? The Shock of the Old

Modern comes from the Latin word **modo**, meaning “just now”. Since when have we been modern? For a surprisingly long time, as the following example shows.

Around 1127, the Abbot Suger began reconstructing his abbey basilica of St. Denis in Paris. His architectural ideas resulted in something never seen before, a “new look” neither classically Greek nor Roman nor Romanesque.

Suger didn't know what to call it, so he fell back on the Latin, **opus modernum**. A **modern work**.



Suger helped to inaugurate an immensely influential architectural style which became known as the **Gothic**.

Gothic was in fact a term of abuse, coined by Italian Renaissance theorists, meaning a northern or German **barbaric style**. The ideal style of Renaissance architects and artists was the classical Greek, or what they called the **antica e buona maniera moderna** – the ancient and good modern style.

Ever since then, architects have been arguing about what best represents a perennial style – classical, gothic, modern or even postmodern.

Dialectical Antagonism

At least since medieval times, there has been a motivating sense of antagonism between “then” and “now”, between ancient and modern. Historical periods in the West have followed one another in **disaffinity** with what has gone before. A rejection of one’s immediate predecessors seems almost instinctively generational.

The result of this historical **dialectic** (from the Greek, **debate** or **discourse**) is that Western culture recognizes no single tradition.

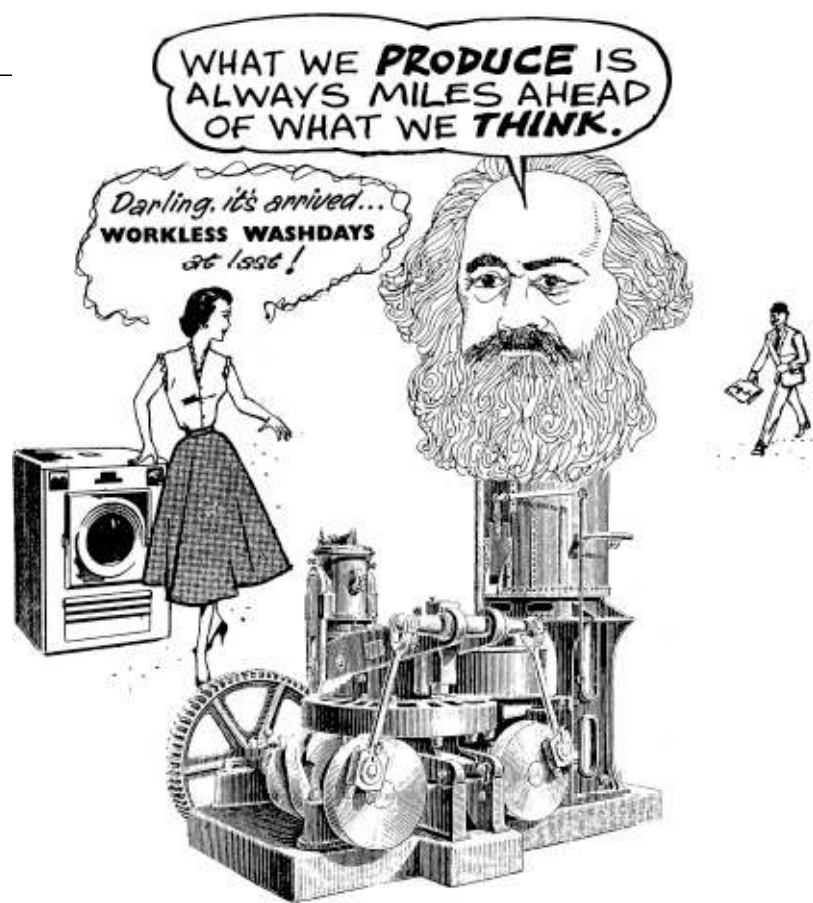
History is carved up into conceptual periods –

medieval
Renaissance
Baroque
Romantic

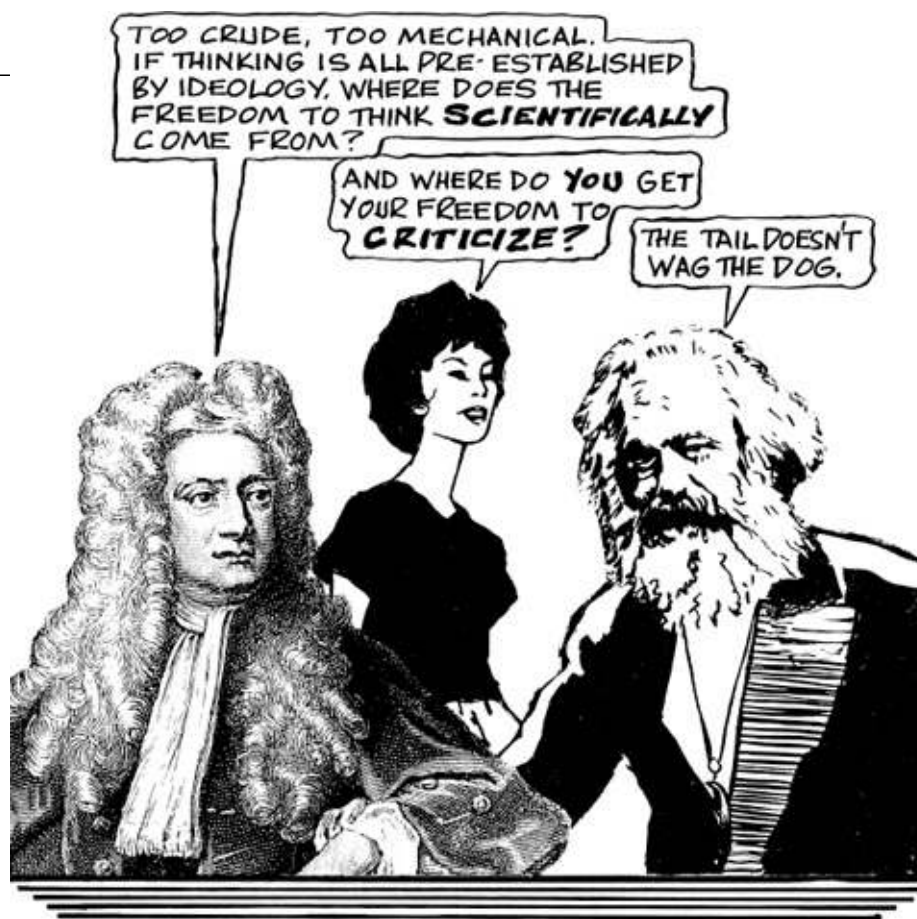
and so on. These antagonistic periods are Western culture’s **sets** of tradition, a sort of “periodic table of tradition.

Tradition in the West is constituted and indeed **energized** by what is in combat with it.

Another peculiarity of Western culture is its strongly **historicist bias**, a belief that history determines the way things are and **must be**.



Karl Marx's **dialectical materialism** provided the classic historicist formula. Marxism established a structural difference between society's traditional or cultural institutions and its economic productive forces. Rapid-paced progress occurs in the **infrastructure**, the economic sphere of productive activities which supports but also subverts the **superstructure**, the social sphere of ideology which includes religion, art, politics, law and all **traditional attitudes**. The superstructure evolves more slowly and is more resistant to change than the economic infrastructure, especially in the modern industrial age of advanced capitalism. The ways we think – or better, those assumptions we take for granted – are pre-established by superstructural **ideologies**.



“Mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve...we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.”

Karl Marx, preface to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy** (1859)

What's MODERNISM?

The Marxian formula is still useful for understanding the different **speed-lanes of change** in the traditional and productive spheres of society.

Modernism, in the infrastructural productive sense, begins in the 1890s and 1900s, a time which experienced mass technological innovations, the second tidal wave of the Industrial Revolution begun nearly a century before.

New Technology

- the internal combustion and diesel engines; steam turbine electricity generators
- electricity and petrol as new sources of power
- the automobile, bus, tractor and aeroplane
- telephone, typewriter and tape machine as the basics of modern office and systems management
- chemical industry's production of synthetic materials – dyes, man-made fibres and plastics
- new engineering materials – reinforced concrete, aluminium and chromium alloys



Mass Media and Entertainment

- advertising and mass circulation newspapers (1890s)
- the gramophone (1877); the Lumière brothers invent cinematography and Marconi the wireless telegraph (1895)
- Marconi's first radio wave transmission (1901)
- first movie theatre, the Pittsburgh Nickelodeon (1905)

Science

- genetics established in the 1900s
- Freud launches psychoanalysis (c.1900)
- discovery of uranium and radium radioactivity by Becquerel and the Curies (1897–9)
- Rutherford's revolutionary new model of the atom overturns classical physics (1911)
- Max Planck's quantum theory of energy (1900) revised by Niels Bohr and Rutherford (1913)
- Einstein's Special and General theories of Relativity (1905 and 1916)



It isn't difficult to see how these innovations extend logically to postmodern scientific and information developments. Two examples...

1. The foundations of postmodern cosmology – atomic theory, quantum and Relativity – were laid down between the 1890s and 1916.
2. The modern copper telephone wire replaced with the postmodern fibre-optic cable increases the information data-load 250,000 times over (the entire contents of Oxford's Bodleian Library transmitted in 42 seconds).

Modernism in the cultural or superstructural sense occupies the same period in the early 1900s – the heroic first phase of modernist experimentation in literature, music, the visual arts and architecture.

Picasso's Big Bang

Despite the telephone, telegraphy and other such technological novelties, a photographic glimpse of everyday life **circa** 1907 looks to us entirely remote from “modernity”. Nothing prepares us – or indeed the good folk of 1907 – for the first truly modernist painting, Picasso’s **Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. U. S.)**, 1907.



Those angular deformities and staring African mask faces depict prostitutes, partly expressing Picasso’s own panic about syphilis but, more importantly, proclaiming a new **anti-representational** model of [de]FORM[ation].



The Crisis of Representation

Some art historians have argued, to an extent correctly, that the invention of photography ended the authority of painting to reproduce reality. Painting pictures of “reality” had simply become obsolete. Technological innovation in the infrastructure had outstripped the superstructural traditions of visual art. Mass production (photography) replaced hand-crafted originality (art).



The crisis runs deeper than this crude but effective scenario suggests. The doctrine of **realism** itself was coming to an end.

Realism depends on a **mirror theory** of knowledge, essentially that the mind is a mirror of reality. Objects existing outside the mind can be **represented** (reproduced by a concept or work of art) in a way that is adequate, accurate and true.

Cézanne: the View Contains the Viewer

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) did not scrap realism but revised it to include **uncertainty** in our perception of things. Representation had to account for the effect of **interaction** between seeing and the object, the variations of viewpoint and possibilities of doubt in what one sees.



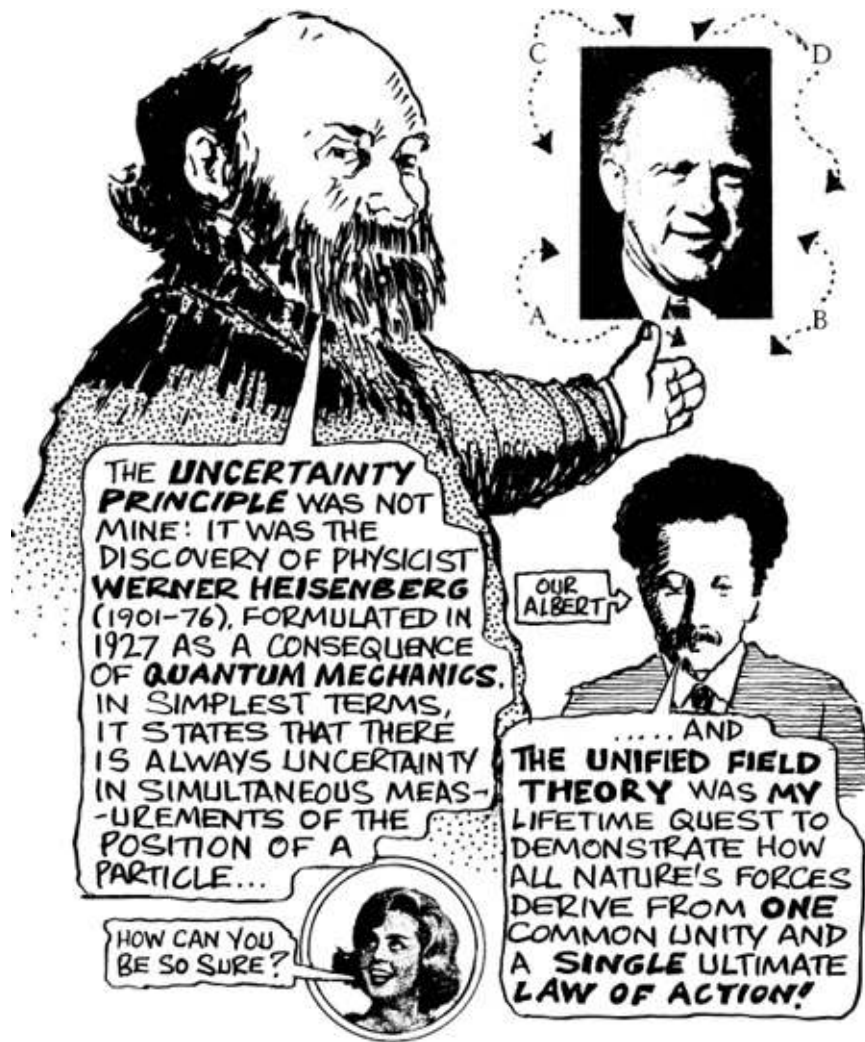
Cézanne had taken a revolutionary new direction, painting not **reality** but the effect of **perceiving** it.

Cézanne was not interested simply to reproduce a fragmented, subjective view of reality. He sought after a basic foundation, a “unified field” theory that must underlie the variability of perception, and this he got from elementary **geometric solids**. In a famous letter of 1904, he advised, “...treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone.”

UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE?
UNIFIED FIELD THEORY?
THESE MAKE CÉZANNE
SOUND LIKE A —
MODERN PHYSICIST!



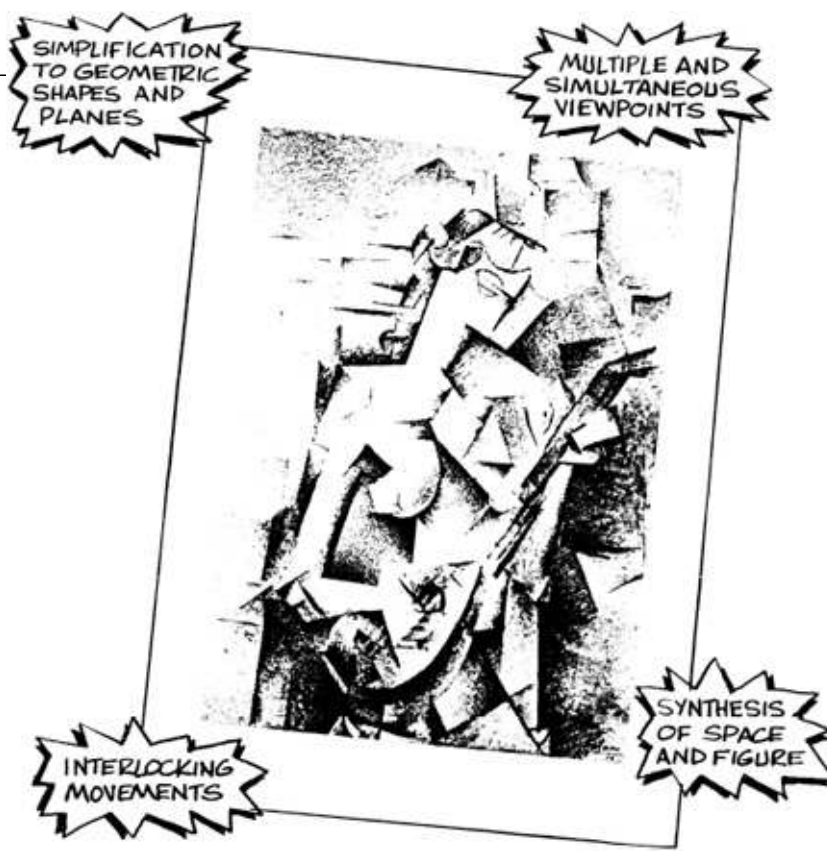
The “Science” of Cubism



Cézanne was not a physicist, modern or otherwise. Nor indeed were his successors and heirs, the Cubists. What we have is one of those rare occasions in history when science and art arrive independently at complementary attitudes.

Cubism, unleashed by Picasso's **Demaiselles d'Avignon**, was then developed by him, Georges Braque and others between 1907 and 1914.

A typical Cubist painting, Picasso's **Girl with a Mandolin** (1910), takes Cézanne's theories of **variability** and **stability** to an astounding logical conclusion.



The human figure simplified to geometry, interacting on a par with the space around it and treated like architecture, might be said to be **dehumanized**. Cubism agreed with modern physics in rejecting the notion of a single isolatable event – the view contains the viewer. This is not necessarily a dehumanizing limit but a recognition that the human is **non-exceptional** to reality.

The End of Original Art?

“Reproducible reality” was left to photography, while art took a quantum leap in a new Cubist direction. Cubism rescued art from obsolescence and re-established its authority to represent reality in a way that photography could not.

But photography threatened both traditional and avantgarde art in another sense not recognized until later, in 1936, when the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin published his essay, **The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**.



He argued that this aura – this fetish of sacred uniqueness – would now be eliminated by **mass reproduction**, essentially by the photographic printing of original works of art in widely distributed books, posters, postcards and even postage stamps.

The mechanical reproducibility of original art must inevitably have a disintegrating effect on “originality” itself.

Modern is Postmodern

The modern is always historically at war with what comes immediately before it. In this same sense, modern is always **post-something**.



The modern ends up being at war with itself and must inevitably become **post-modern**. This weird logic of becoming postmodern is signalled by the Latin origin of modern, **modo**, “just now”. Postmodern therefore literally means “after just now”.

Curiously, a useful definition of postmodern art arises from this dilemma of “just now” negating the preceding “just now”. According to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard...

What, then, is the postmodern?... It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received, is only yesterday... must be suspected. What space does Cézanne challenge? The Impressionists'. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cézanne's. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it Cubist. And (Daniel) Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched in the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.

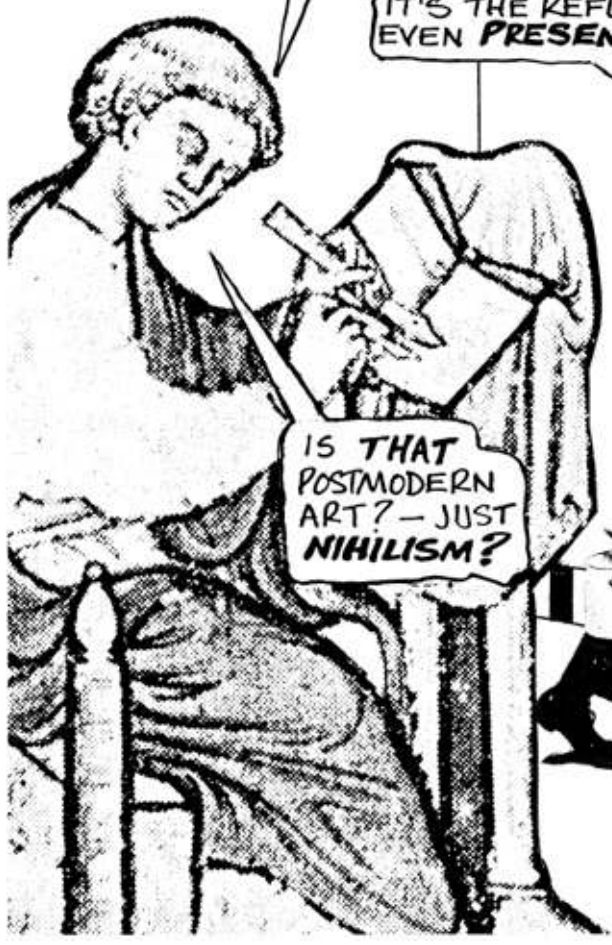
The Postmodern Condition (1979)

PHEW! RUN THAT BY ME AGAIN, JEAN-FRANÇOIS!



SO - THAT'S THE GENEALOGY OF POSTMODERN ART? THAT'S HOW WE END UP IN BUREN'S EMPTY GALLERY ROOMS?

IT'S THE REFUTATION OF EVEN **PRESENTING** A WORK...



IS THAT POSTMODERN ART? - JUST **NIHILISM?**



Well, in fact, it might not be. Let's continue tracing our genealogy to see how or if or at what break-

off point we arrive at postmodern art.

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