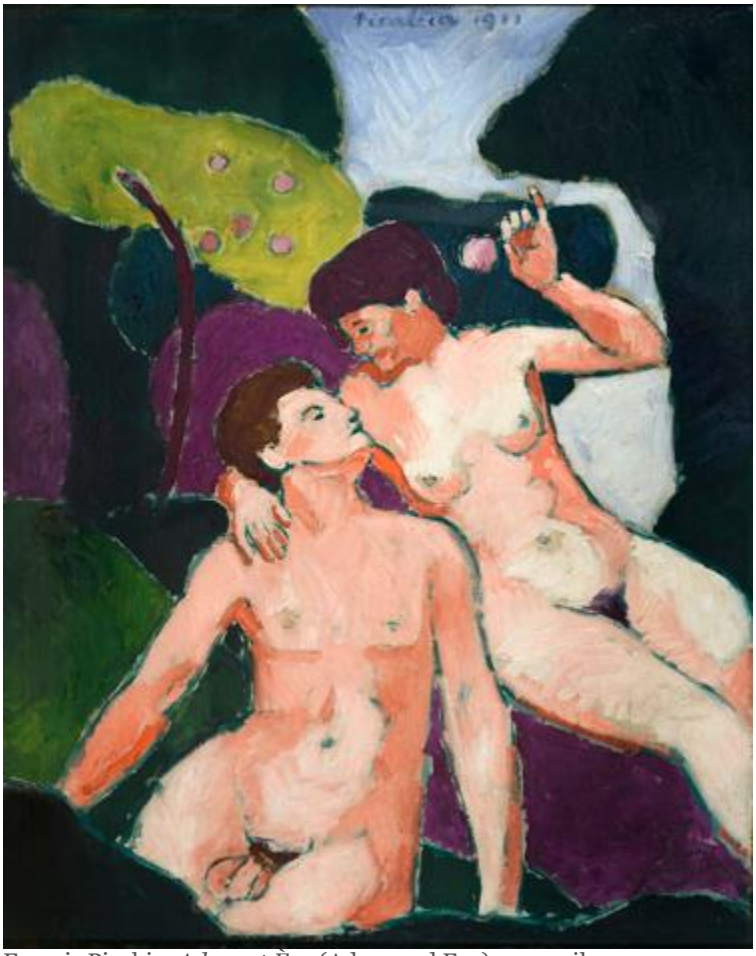
FRANCIS PICABIA, ART-WORLD JAILER: PHILIP PEARLSTEIN ON ‘ONE OF THE PRIME MOVERS OF MODERN ART,’ IN 1970

BY ***The Editors of ARTnews*** POSTED **11/18/16 4:04 PM**

Francis Picabia, *Je revois en souvenir ma chère Udnie* (I See Again in Memory My Dear Udnie), 1914, oil on canvas.
PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, JOHN WRONN; ART: ©2016 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK AND ADAGP, PARIS/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, HILLMAN PERIODICALS FUND

With the Museum of Modern Art in New York preparing to open a much-anticipated Francis Picabia retrospective on Monday, we turn back to the September 1970 issue of ARTnews*, in which Philip Pearlstein wrote an essay about the artist. The Guggenheim Museum had staged a Picabia retrospective in that year (MoMA's show, reviewed in these pages by Andrew Russeth, is the first the United States since then), and Pearlstein took this article as an opportunity to pen a love letter to the artist. Pearlstein's piece follows in full below. For more articles about Picabia from the ARTnews archives, consult the Retrospective that appears in our Fall 2016 issue.*

"Hello and Goodbye, Francis Picabia"
By Philip Pearlstein
September 1970



Francis Picabia, *Adam et Ève* (Adam and Eve), 1911, oil on canvas.

One of the prime movers of modern art is subject of a major retrospective at the Guggenheim; here an American painter tells how he first studied Picabia, felt liberated by his vanguard ideas, and finally rejected them

Fifteen years ago, I completed a Master's thesis on Francis Picabia. I spent almost three years trying to get inside Picabia's mind, but the attitudes of artists in New York and Paris in the years 1910-25 seemed as removed from my immediate experience and understanding as those of some ancient civilization. Florence in the year 1420 seemed no more distant than Paris 1920. The effort to try to understand the recent past was so great that at its conclusion I asked myself why need I, as a painter (I had my first one-man show about the time the thesis was completed), feel bound to continue the traditions of "modern" art." I didn't, and with that rejection I felt liberated. But had I been imprisoned before? Yes, and so had most of our art world. And one of our jailers was Francis Picabia.

One of my early memories is of a 1930s movie in which some, like Adolphe Menjou, dressed in an artist's smock and beret, in a room with elegantly gowned high-society people, sings a song explaining "modern art." Appropriate paintings are around to illustrate his song-lecture. The line I remember best was something like "We don't paint the whistle, but the….(sound of a whistle)." The painting he points to is composed of spirals.The song made a number of similar comparisons. That was basic education for millions, and was supported by many more examples from those decades.

How did such foreign ideas invade our pragmatic shores? Picab helped bring them here at the time of the 1913 Armory show. He one of the few European artists to make the trip (he could afford · And he held a series of newspaper interviews at the time of the ope ing, and again several weeks later on the occasion of a one-man exhibition, at Alfred Stieglitz's avant-garde gallery, of watercolors made in New York after his arrival. This series of watercolors is, for me, Picabia's highest accomplishment as a painter, and is central to his subsequent development. His interviews, given prominence in newspapers, were reprinted and widely circulated. He briefly was Mr. Modern Art, and his statements were crucial, I believe, to the evolution of esthetic opinion in this country.

Francis Picabia, *Tableau Rastadada* (Rastadada Painting), 1920, cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper with ink.
PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, PETER BUTLER; ART: ©2016 ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK AND ADAGP, PARIS/THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, GIFT OF ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER BY EXCHANGE

Consider the following: “You of New York should be quick to understand me and my fellow painters. Your New York is the Cubist, the Futuritst city. It expresses in its architecture, its life, its spirit, the modern. thought. You have passed through all the old schools, and are Futurists in word and deed and thought. You have been affectedby all these: schools just as we have been affected by our older schools.

“Because of your extreme modernity therefore, you should quickly understand the studies which I have made since my arrival in New York. They express the spirit of New York as I feel it, and the crowded streets of your city as I feel them, their surging, their unrest, their commercialism and their atmospheric charm.

You see no form? No substance? Is it that I go out into your city and see nothing? I see much, much more perhaps, than you who are used to it see. I see your stupendous skyscrapers, your mammoth buildings and marvelous subways, a thousand evidences of your great wealth on all sides. The tens of thousands of workers and toilers, you arlert and shrewd-looking shop girls, all hurrying somewhere. I see your theatre crowds at night gleaming, fluttering, smilingly happy, smartly gowned. There you have the spirit of modernity again.

“But I do not paint these things which my eye sees. I paint that which my brain, my soul, sees. I walk from the Battery to Central Park. I mingle with your workers, and your Fifth Avenue *mondaines*. My brain gets the impression of each movement; there is the driving hurry of the former, their breathless haste to reach the place of their work in the morning and their equal haste to reach their homes at night. There is the languid grace of the latter, emanating a subtle perfume, a more subtle sensuousness.

“I hear every language in the world spoken, the staccato of the Ne.wYorker, the soft cadences of the Latin people, the heavy rumble of the Teuton, and the ensemble remains in my soul as the ensemble of some great opera.

“At night from your harbor I look at your mammoth buildings. I see your city as a city of aerial lights and shadows; the streets are your shadows. Your harbor in the daylight shows the shipping of a world, the flags of all countries add their color to that given by your sky, your w.aters, and your painted craft of every size.

“I absorb these impressions in my brain. I am in no hurry to put them on canvas. I let them remain in my brain, and then when the spirit of creation is at flood tide, I improvise my pictures as a musician improvises music. The harmonies of my studies grow and take form under my brush, as the musician’s harmonies grow under his fingers. His music is from his brain and his soul just as my studies are from my brain and soul. Is this not clear to you?”

(It has continuously surprised me that Picabia, who makes many comparisons between painting and music, seems not to have heard of Kandinsky's ideas at this time; *On the Spiritual in Art* appeared in 1912. It is also a point of passing interest that several early historians of modern painting credit Kandinsky with producing the first abstract painting, while others claim that Picabia's watercolor *Caoutchouc*, 1909, is really that monumental landmark; however as *caoutchouc* means rubber, I read this picture as an attempt to portray a bouncing ball, or balls, and not as Non-Objective.)

Francis Picabia, *Optophone [I]*, 1922, Ink, watercolor, and pencil on board.
PHOTO: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, JOHN WRONN; art: ©2016 ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK AND ADAGP, PARIS/ KRAVIS COLLECTION

In another of his interviews in New York, Picabia seems to speak directly to the painter only that which my eye sees: "Art, art, what is art? Is it copying faithfully a person's face? A landscape? No, that's machinery. Painting nature as she is is not art, it is mechanical genius. The old masters turned out by hand the most perfect models, the most faithful copies of what they saw. That all their paintings are not alike is due to the fact that no two men see the same things the same way. Those old masters were, and their modern followers are, faithful depictors of the actual, but I do not call that art today because we have outgrown it. It is old and only the new should live. Creating a picture without models is art.

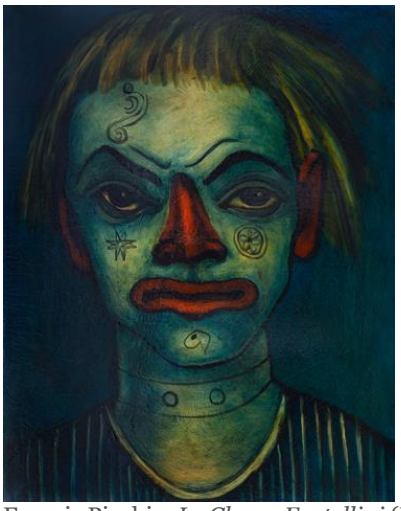
"They were successful, those old masters: they filled a place in our life that cannot be filled otherwise, but we have outgrown them. It is a most excellent thing to keep

their paintings in the art museums as curiosities for us and for those who will come after us. Their paintings are to us what the alphabet is to the child.

“We moderns, if so you think of us, express the spirit of the modern time, the twentieth century. And we express it in this music.”

There it is. The burning spirit of modernity that 57 years later has atrophied into an offensive extreme in our museums that are haunted by the “Modern.” Today this would be thought provincial – the acceptance as gospel, the word of fashion, from the big center (Paris) by self-conscious country cousins, but 57 years ago these statements were hot news. Fifty seven years is the life-span of some of our senior curators, almost twice the years of some of our notable younger curators (not to mention the ages of our critics).

These statements of Picabia’s in 1913 are remarkable from an artist who as recently as 1909 had been producing run-of-the-mill academic Impressionistic paintings, and who 10 years later, as one of the first of the Surrealists (they were pretty much the same group as the last of the Dadas), was incorporating rather lovely studies after Renaissance masters in his work. But then Picabia always turned his back on whatever became “Establishment,” even the Dada and Surrealist movements.



Francis Picabia, *Le Clown Fratellini* (Fratellini Clown), 1937–38, oil on canvas.

The paintings in the Armory Show were themselves a convincing argument for “Modern Art,” but Picabia’s statements added to the tidal wave that washed away the reputations of a number of fine but not experimental or abstract American painters. And their successors have bad a rough time of it since (prompting one figurative colleague of mine to suggest recently that representational painters should now demand “reparations” from the museums). Though American Scene painters of the 1930s managed to gain some community standing, they too were soon drowned by

the Museum of Modern Art's aggressive education of the American public demonstrating a cultural lag of a quarter of a century after Picabia explained what it was all about. That Museum's catalogues and exhibitions educated all of us in the kind of art we should look at and the kind we should ignore. It has only been through the sieve of the recent taste for Camp that some 19th-century artists not in the direct line of development towards 20th-century modernism can be studied again with seriousness by younger artists. For many years we have generally blind to a great deal of very good art that didn't make the approved list. A few strays have been allowed: an occasional Hopper, especially if its coincidental "Cubist" structure could be easily seen. And while the educated were looking another way, Andrew Wyeth took dominion in the hearts of those who "know what they like."

The painting that received the most attention at the Armory Show Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. It was the title, rather than the image, that made it notorious, the object of wisecracks and cartoons. The *Nude* simply could not be seen by the public's untrained eyes, while the title is as memorable a phrase as any painting has had the luck to get as a label. The image of the painting is taken straight from a diagram in a book that is a later French version of Muybridge's photographic work on the human figure in motion, and thus indicates the path that Duchamp was following, and his relationship to Picabia.

In those years Duchamp and Picabia were close friends, and an artistic team comparable to Picasso and Braque. As a team they must now be acknowledged as the gestators of today's forms of "concept" art. If Picasso and Matisse provide most of our archtypical "painterly" gestures and structures for the continuation of traditional easel painting, with Mondrian teaching the most radical new tricks to the old dog, then Picabia and Duchamp illumine (God help us) the way beyond. Because he was to Duchamp as Picasso was to Braque that is, the leader, this major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum now accords to Picabia his place as one of the pivotal artists of our century.

"I suppose a case could be made to demonstrate that the main influence of Duchamp has been in the area of activity-type art-forms more closely allied to dance, theater, music and landscape architecture, while the influence of Picabia has been more limited to what could be called non-traditional easel painting and graphic design, including typography. (John Cage's recent graphic work of fragments of words printed on overlapping transparent plastic panels, titled *Not Wanting to Say Anything about Marcel*, an obvious homage to Duchamp, actually derives from Picabia's typographic style.)

But the germinal field for both men was their serious practice of painting. Duchamp was Picabia's junior by six years, and by the time Duchamp had painted his first Cezannesque portraits in 1910, Picabia had gone through a couple of styles as an exhibiting artist. Starting around 1895 with Pissarro-like landscapes, Picabia

developed towards a Seurat-like flat manner with landscapes, then suddenly anticipated the open Analytic-Cubist look, with *Caoutchouc*, 1909. After they discovered each other, the minds of Duchamp and Picabia were in close step for a few years, as they worked their way through a blend of Cubism and Futurism with applied musical analogies, into the hieroglyphic puns and games of their Dada style.

Francis Picabia, *Les Amoureux (Après la pluie)* (The Lovers [After the Rain]), 1925, enamel paint and oil on canvas.

The disparity of their fame in the U.S.A. forthe last 30 years may be accounted for by the strong and imaginative disciples Duchamp attracted during his long residence in this country and the attendant popularization of his life style. Picabia lived the last 30 years of his life in relative obscurity in France. Duchamp's dramatic adherence to the principles of his Gestalt makes a strong· journalistic impression, Picabia's remaining decades were spent in producing paintings in several different styles, none so radical as to attract much attention, and he seemingly had lost himself — not a compelling image for journalists. His only disciple had been Marcel Duchamp.

My own interest in the work of Picabia was awakened by a shock of recognition. I had dabbled with American Scene-type painting just before World War II; then for a time, while in the U.S.Infantry, I Worked on diagrammatic charts of infantry weapons. After the war, I worked on industrial catalogues, drafting and doing typographic design. My first job in that field was with the man who also was the teacher of my design courses at Carnegie Tech, Robert Lepper. His own paintings and sculptures had long been based on machine elements, and he introduced me to the work of several Americans, notably Schamberg, whose cool, formal compositions employed machine parts as pristine design elements. But my favorite painting then

was Paul Klee's *Twittering Machine*, whose elements were not just formal. I liked the possibilities of using machine forms metaphorically, as puns, thematically.

My paintings from about 1947 until 1951, when I started work on the Picabia thesis, were often based on shapes I took from the industrial catalogues I worked on. My masterwork was a painting of a girl (extruded window frame cross-section) being raped by a shower (diagram of the shower pipes like a stick figure, spigots for hands, and faucet for phallus), but with an expressionistic use of paint and color.

When I saw the first edition of the Skira books on modern painting, there was a painting by Picabia, *Parade Amoureuse*, 1917, of two funny machines "relating" to each other. About the same time I read Gertrude Stein's praise of Picabia as the greatest of modern painters in her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. This from the close friend of Picasso and Matisse! (Or was it Alice B. Toklas' opinion only?) However I had seen a Picabia exhibition in 1949, and it hadn't been exactly overwhelming in its impact, nor had I seen anything relating to machines there. That exhibition, at the Rose Fried Gallery, had been made up mostly of a number of little canvases painted black, with a few colored dots and circles of different sizes scattered across the surface of each, from the 1940s. And taking up one end of that small gallery was the very-large painting *Edtaonisl*, *Ecclesiastique*. This large, complicated-looking Cubist abstraction was painted in 1913, 30 years before the black paintings.

Francis Picabia, *Haschich* (Hashish), 1948, oil on canvas.

1950 is only 20 years ago, and I considered myself a relatively knowledgeable young American artist, but Marcel Duchamp was to me then only a dim figure who had been written up in magazines as a strange man who had been a Dada artist and had

given up art to play chess. Dada was only the funny name of an anarchistic type of movement in which the artists made funny things and acted silly, and about which hardly anything was Written until Robert Motherwell edited a book of documents, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 1951. Picabia was a new name. That exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery had impressed me as demonstrating a strange kind of reverse progress, from the sophisticated, grandiose painting of 1913 to the simplistic late paintings. Now added to those stylistic extremes were machine diagrams used in paintings in a symbolistic way (where I had thought myself a pioneer), and I knew I was facing an enigma that was capable of being "studied in depth," with "original research," the requirements of an M.A. thesis at the Institute of Fine Arts, N.Y.

To try to understand Picabia's evolution as a painter, I made a thorough investigation of the relationship between the technical devices and the verbalizations of the Cubist painters and their spokesmen, compared to those of the Futurist painters, and contrasted the technical devices and verbalizations of Picabia and Duchamp (for I
found it impossible to discuss the work of one without the other) with each of those groups. This was a large collating process. The one artist, of all of those whose ideas I studied, to win my genuine admiration was Boccioni. I admired the clarity with which he expressed his complex ideas about painting, and the ideas themselves seemed very intriguing. I also became increasingly enthusiastic about his work and almost decided to switch my subject.

My thesis resolved itself into being a study of how complex literary-type subject matter led Picabia and Duchamp into being extraordinarily inventive with pictorial means. One question was continuously annoying. Which of the two originated major ideas? I would have liked to discuss this with Duchamp during that time when I could have visited him, but I could not think of a way to phrase the question without offense, nor could I see how at that distance he could be objective in his reply. Also, I was somewhat inhibited by the fact that Mrs. Harriet Janis, who was friendly to me throughout this project, told me that all the answers were recorded on 10 hours of taped interviews she and Rudy Blesh had made with Duchamp. Perhaps the answers are still there.

I did spend an afternoon with Walter Arens berg, the patron and friend of Duchamp and Picabia, at his home in Los Angeles. This was just during the time when a number of the pieces from his collection were assembled in his sun parlor for crating and shipping off to the Philadelphia Museum. Arensberg, when I asked about the exchange of influence between the two artists, flatly stated that Picabia got the machine subjects and the use of the titles on paintings from Duchamp. My collating of external evidence indicated the reverse, but I did not pursue the argument. Arensberg did say that Picabia was a strong eccentric personality, and that his inherited money brought him friendship of certain personalities and artists,

including Duchamp. Arensberg then quoted a French saying to the effect that friends respect, yet take advantage of, the rich ones. This reinforced the impression I had from reading an account by Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia (she was Picabia's wife then and the constant observer of that period of Picabia's life) of the evolution of Apollinaire's book, *The Cubist Painters*, in 1912, and the "Section d'Or" exhibition that it accompanied. Picabia footed the bills for that publication, and Apollinaire allowed himself to expand his categories ofkinds of Cubism to include Picabia. Arensberg then went on to speak of Picabia's alcoholism, and said that it was an era (the years of World War I, into the 1920s) of heavy drinking. But early in the '20s, Picabia was given a life-or-death sentence by his doctors to give up alcohol, which he did, and in Arensberg's opinion Picabia's work thereafter never equalled the early work. He felt that to evaluate Picabia properly it would be best to forget all he did later. The rest of the world seems to have concurred with Arensberg.

As I was reaching the end of the initial phase of research, Picabia was briefly in the news; he died in Paris and his estate was tied up in a legal tangle that made interesting newspaper items.

The visit with Arensberg indicated to me that further interviews would be of little help, though the experience might be charming. A letter to Gabrielle Buffet brought the response that she was writing her own book. I decided not to bother Duchamp; I was only working on an M.A. thesis, and was far more interested in what I was learning from studying the works themselves and the artists' published statements than in reminiscences or opinions.

Francis Picabia. *Untitled (Espagnole et agneau de l'apocalypse)* (Untitled [Spanish Woman and Lamb of the Apocalypse]), 1927/1928, watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper.

My study concentrated on the years that saw the development and end of machine symbolism in Picabia's work, 1908-1925. (It is necessary to keep in mind that their symbolism was private and arbitrary; meanings were assigned to pictorial forms at the whim of the moment, and were usually in-jokes for themselves and a small circle of friends. The artist was not concerned with communicating to the world at large.) At first the material I accumulated and Picabia's body of work made no sense to me. Though I knew that everything was satirical, anti-establishment, a kind of Museum of Modern Anti-Art, a key was missing. It was provided by the observation of a friend while we were looking *Je revois en souvenir ma chère Udnie*, 1914, at Janis Gallery. My friend pointed out an unmistakable phallic element performing in the painting. I had innocently been reading the shapes simply as automotive. But a consideration of the title, along with the visual sex activity, showed me what the hero of the statement "I see again in memory me dear Udnie" (which I translated from pig-Latin as "Nudie") remembered so fondly, and the iconography of much of f the work fell into place. Both Picabia and Duchamp had developed, in hieroglyphic manner, picaresque novellas of the experiences of a couple of ladies. Duchamp's heroine, a virgin, first appears in *The Bride*, 1912. Then, work by work, in the accumulative manner of Rodin's studies for his *Gates of Hell*, Duchamp peopled her ambience. She achieves apotheosis in the large painting on glass, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, 1923, in which most of the separate works are repeated. Duchamp in an interview in the 1940s said that he would paint again if he got another idea for a painting.

Picabia did the reverse. He started his epic with a series of large paintings, among which are *Je revois en souvenir ma chère Udnie*,
and *Editionsl*, *Ecclésiastique* (which I deciphered as the picture of a clergyman watching a "Star" dancer rehearsing with her troupe aboard an ocean liner, in proper art-historical iconographic terms). Her heroine is *"Le Fille née sans mère,"* the girl born without a mother (which I deciphered as "the machine"). She travels to America, has her adventures, then several years later writes and publishes a book of poetry that sums up her world view. The poems are even better than her illustrations for the book—I translated every one of them from the French into my own English. But after her first appearances in the large paintings, her many other manifestations are small-scaled and often are no more than line drawings, but each of her appearances further defines her attitudes towards her world. And it seems that when he exhausted his rambling investigations of the world—all through his Dada works—Picabia, too, came to a stop. His work then went off in other directions.

Picabia's parting from the world was nostalgic: "I have removed myself from certain Dadaists because I was suffocating among them. Each day I became more sad, terribly bored . . . I don't mean review the complete history of the Dada movement now, but I want to make a few points: The Dada spirit truly existed for only three or four years. It was expressed by Marcel Duchamp and me at the end of 1912: Hulsenbeck, Tzara or Ball found the name Dada in 1916. With the name the movement reached its culminating point but it continued to evolve, each of us

bringing as much as possible . . . Our success, the pleasures of the game, attracted in 1918 many people who have only the name of Dada: Then everything changed; I saw that Dada, like Cubism, was going to the disciples who *would understand*, and I felt I had to run away from these people . . . Dada is like a cigarette with an agreeable odor. When the brand name gets consumed, it remains tobacco, and count on a man of genius to pick it up and give it a new name . . . I like to walk by myself along unknown streets. One day resembles the next if we do not at least create the illusion of novelty, and Dada is no longer new, for the moment. The bourgeoisie represents the finite, Dada would be the same if it lasted too much longer."

My thesis ended at that point. I had worked my way through modernism and symbolism by writing rather than painting. And I decided I wanted no more of the complex symbolism or "modernism" for myself.