

***Machine Art, 1934.*** By Jennifer Jane Marshall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. xxiii + 212 pp.; 61 illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00 cloth.

In March of 1934, New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) presented the exhibition *Machine Art*. The exhibition checklist, layout, and catalogue suggested that modern art's ideal of purity-in-form was most apparent in the design of commercial and domestic objects and the machine-made components from which they were fabricated. On display were such shiny, utilitarian objects as propellers, ball bearings, springs, sinks, cocktail tumblers, bowls, and beakers. Spearheading this now famous project, which traveled to several other cities as well, were MOMA's director Alfred Barr and curator Philip Johnson. The search for some sort of rarefied essence, for forms that bespoke aesthetic perfection, was of course not new to the twentieth century. In his *Philebus*, Plato suggested that beauty is not found in representation per se, but in the lines and other shapes with which sub-

jects are represented in the first place. Unlike subject matter, form is not dependent on context for its appeal; form, according to Plato, is beautiful “always and absolutely.” As Jennifer Jane Marshall observes in her award-winning book, *Machine Art, 1934*,<sup>1</sup> Plato’s words provided the epigraph of the *Machine Art* catalogue and were printed on MOMA’s walls as part of the exhibition design. Such absolutism was key to the museum’s nascent formalist philosophy of modern art, and Marshall argues persuasively that the 1934 exhibition validated abstraction by showing its presence in ubiquitous objects uncluttered by their industrial and household contexts.

Offering a concise but sound historiography of early twentieth-century modernist American art and criticism, Marshall’s preface and introduction explore Barr and Johnson’s particular brand of decontextualized modernism, in which quotidian items could inculcate respect for the supposedly timeless essence of pure, basic form. And yet the *Machine Art* exhibition was very much *of its time*. Marshall never lets the reader get too far from the paradox that the same exhibition that monumentalized American durability and ingenuity bore a strikingly cruel and ironic irrelevance alongside the overproduction of unaffordable objects and the devaluation of labor in Depression-era America.

The exhibition’s goals of artistic formalism and aesthetic absolutism were especially apparent in the exhibition catalogue. With its wide margins and clean, rational layout, the catalogue’s design mimicked *Machine Art* itself, exalting the formal purity of unembellished objects in a tidy, mathematically precise gallery installation. Ruth Bernhard’s photographs in the publication further objectified the items and removed them from history and use, effectively transforming them, as Marshall observes in her first chapter, from things to mere signs of things. As examples of “straight photography,” Bernhard’s images buffered the common objects from unnecessary ornament—what another photographer called “escetic aestheticism” (33)—and facilitated the curators’ promotion of “sturdy and autonomous ... beauty and meaning” (34). Perhaps most intriguing is the author’s compelling suggestion that, with their dropped muslin ceilings, boxy spaces, and carefully controlled lighting, the gallery spaces functioned like so many cameras, as if further objectifying the objects, making them into representations of themselves. Marshall shows throughout her book that *Machine Art* constituted something of a reform crusade. Self-appointed teachers and revealers of Truth, Barr and Johnson believed they were performing social work by curing Americans of “cultural lag” (in which technology progresses more quickly than family, church, education, and other institutions), and thus helping citizens adjust to the modern era.

With Plato as “*Machine Art*’s philosophical mascot” (61), Johnson believed that the objects on display bridged what the philosopher in *Philebus* posited as an unbridgeable gap between the real and the ideal.

In her second chapter Marshall uses the analogy of the recently abolished gold standard to underscore a widespread American anxiety about the gulf between abstract value and concrete application of value. As of 1934 specie no longer backed up bank notes—President Roosevelt suggested that Americans attend less to materials and purchased objects than to traditional values and time-honored cultural institutions. Yet individuals often resorted to hoarding gold because it both physically embodies and conceptually symbolizes value. With self-consciously Neoplatonic logic, Johnson et al. declared that the shiny, unblemished objects were concrete examples of worth—a far cry from the varying worth of paper money—and that they were abstract value given material form. Like gold, ball bearings were “solid, immediate, and real” (78).

The human makers and designers of these objects were diminished. With ready comparisons to the productive efficiency of assembly line manufacturing and Frederick Taylor’s so-called scientific management, *Machine Art* alienated laborers from the objects they produced. Industrial manufacturers, but not artists’ names, were listed in the exhibition. Marshall’s third chapter shows that, like previous MOMA projects, the 1934 exhibition privileged aesthetic power over social content, and in so doing, deified objects at the expense of their use, users, or makers. Discovering and researching the formally beguiling objects, and reassembling and revealing them, Johnson emerges as the real artist—or *auteur*—in the *Machine Art* exhibition (Lewis Mumford dubbed Johnson’s exhibition design a work of art in its own right). Marshall demonstrates the extent to which the exhibition looked and functioned like a department store (the catalogue even listed prices of the objects on display). In an age in which retailers incorporated “planned obsolescence” (117) and updated the outward appearance of essentially unchanged commodities, Johnson-as-reformer “re-skilled” (120) his audiences, teaching them how to see beyond fickle fashion trends.

Marshall’s final chapter examines MOMA public relations director Sarah Newmeyer’s work on behalf of *Machine Art*, with special attention given to the “beauty contests” in which celebrity panels or public polls selected favorite works in an exhibition. One such contest featured John Dewey, museum administrator Charles R. Richards, and Amelia Earhart on its jury, and Marshall uses a photograph of the three to demonstrate how far Johnson and Barr’s formalism was from Dewey’s contention that truth in any form, any medium, comes from direct experience (the philosopher’s *Art as Experience* was published just earlier in 1934). The photograph has all three holding objects from the exhibition, though only Dewey meets the viewer’s gaze. “Action and participation” were the hallmarks of Dewey’s method, and that practical, hands-on sensibility was apparent in another *Machine Art* beauty contest, in which public visitors—not highfalutin intellectuals and credentialed authorities—chose household goods over industrial

components. Demonstrating that Barr separated design along a gendered “decorative”-“constructional” fault-line, the author suggests that the real contest in *Machine Art* was one of cold, detached functionalism versus vernacular experience. In a useful (if disturbing) chapter conclusion, Marshall outlines the slippery path from antiseptic cultural absolutism to Johnson’s dabbling in National Socialism (which he later repudiated).

Some readers may grapple with selected passages in *Machine Art*, which, with its share of densely loaded paragraphs, had me re-reading a few sentences. This however is a measure not of imprecise or unclear writing by the author, but of her earnest and fair-handed (in some passages obsessively so) treatment of the strained subtleties advanced by a group of practitioners all too aware of their historical moment. It was in fact a complex series of multifaceted events and often self-consciously cryptic ideologies—one invariably playing off the other—that conspired to produce the *Machine Art* exhibition of 1934. Moreover, for all Marshall’s summaries of heady philosophical arguments (Plato, Aquinas, and Heidegger, for starters), her arguments are everywhere strengthened by the fruitful results of deep archival digging. In the end, Marshall’s humor, occasionally puckish tone, and fluid use of language provide a healthy check upon an exhibition that, in its quest for an over-theorized absolutism, was none of those things.

#### Notes

1. *Machine Art, 1934* won the 2013 Robert Motherwell Book Award for outstanding publication in the history and criticism of modernism in the arts from the Dedalus Foundation.

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