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## **The Experience of Formalism**

*Matthew Bowman*

**Roger Fry and Italian Art, by *Caroline Elam*, London: Paul Holberton Publishing and The Burlington Magazine, 2019, 452 pp., 250 illus., hardback, £100.**

**Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism, by *Sam Rose*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, 224 pp., 27 b. & w. illus., hardback, £71.95.**

With the apparent waning of postmodernism, and our deepening comprehension of the diverse theoretical positions erroneously labelled ‘post-structuralism’, new possibilities have opened for reconsidering ideas that not so long ago were pushed to the margins or left for dead. For example, concepts such as autonomy and art for art’s sake, aesthetics and aestheticism were largely bundled and conflated together under the weight of postmodern debates. In more recent years, however, crucial distinctions between them have been disentangled and we are now better placed to perceived aesthetics, for instance, in a more positive light. Formalism, too, is another once-vital concept that came to seem reprehensibly outdated. Certainly, by the late 1960s, ‘formalism’ designated less a methodology for

understanding artworks than an accusation denoting blindness towards contextual elements. The turning against Clement Greenberg in that decade has a great deal to do with the conjugating and rejection of autonomy, art for art's sake, aesthetics, aestheticism, formalism, and, ultimately, modernism. Yet perhaps not all the approbation was unjustified and this leaves us with two questions. First, how could formalism come to strike many twentieth-century critics as a viable intellectual approach towards artworks in the first place? Second, what value, if any, might formalism hold today?

Answering either those two questions entails construing formalism beyond the reductive clichés that has long been ascribed to it. And that enjoins us to revisit aspects of its history for the purpose of apprehending how those clichés came into existence. The two books under review here, deploying quite distinct approaches and raising various questions, assist in this matter. Caroline Elam's volume is dedicated to Fry's numerous writings on Italian Renaissance art published in *The Burlington Magazine* and elsewhere, as well as his dialogues with Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson. Meanwhile, Sam Rose's monograph concentrates on Fry's attempts to define the notion of form before examining its ramifications within mostly British art criticism during the twentieth century. But while this may suggest engaging two *separate* histories and methodologies, namely formalism and connoisseurship, Rose draws attention to

their entanglement: ‘the rise of formalism coincided with the spread of a new model of connoisseurship that had a dramatic influence on the art worlds of Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’.<sup>1</sup>

Elam’s book is a substantial, lavishly produced volume that returns Fry from his possibly better-known engagements with post-Impressionism to his roots in, and longstanding engagement with, Renaissance art. The book is divided into four parts, the first comprised by Elam’s detailed overview of Fry’s career and ideas. Much of this material is biographical and contextual in scope; on the whole, this renders Elam’s account one of the most extensive offered on Fry’s intellectual development to date. Her first four chapters, in part one, follow a chronological narrative, from Fry’s boyhood and Quaker upbringing to his education and hence onto his increasing involvement with the art world.

Those searching for a more analytical examination of Fry’s ideas, for the concepts that underpinned his comprehension of formalism, will find much of the crucial material in chapters five and six within this first part. If there is a criticism to be proffered here, it is that much of Elam’s focus on Fry’s theories is more explanatory than evaluative. This is not inevitably a tremendous problem as she provides a strong and effective introduction to Fry’s significance and her account of his life help to contextualize those ideas. But if Elam’s

assumption of Fry's significance is hardly implausible at face value, her deeper rationale is left rather unelucidated. It is as if either Fry's texts (republished in subsequent parts) or the historically-oriented exposition of his ideas has resulted in his enduring relevance being utterly self-evident to the reader. Elam's occasional indirect references to the sceptical attitudes towards Fry and his legacy ultimately leaves those attitudes unexplained and uninterrogated and, at the same time, rather diminishes the motivations undergirding the book's existence.

It is at the end of the first part, somewhat surprisingly but quite expectedly, that we experience one of the dynamics that has organized Elam's book:

The formal analysis of paintings, which seemed something of a novelty at the time of Wölfflin and Fry, is now almost completely discredited, having been reduced to a kind of mechanical vacuity in the 1950s . . . Equally, the study of historical or individual style or quality is often now seen to be epistemologically or ideologically suspect, bound up with unacceptable notions of agency and authorship, or of interest primarily to the art market. . . . However, much is lost if works of art are considered merely as archaeological specimens of material culture, as functional 'images', as

bundles of religious or political messages, or as indices of social status and power. To be sure, if this is all they are, then there is no need for the analytical visual skills of the art historian or the art critic.<sup>2</sup>

Few names are mentioned and the conditions of this animus are left underdeveloped. Little argument is proffered outlining a defence of Fry's claims as such or even sufficiently explaining why the various rejections are problematic. Ernst H. Gombrich is highlighted as a major detractor of formalism and is presented as counterposing form to illusion. But this point bears qualifying as Gombrich's anti-formalist stance did not result in a lack of sensitivity to the specifically visual (which one might construe as testifying to Gombrich's own complex inheritance of Heinrich Wölfflin's teachings). Other than Gombrich, Elam lists the Marxist social history of art and what was once known as 'New Art History' as intellectual models trenchantly hostile to Fry's approach and as responsible in some measure for its marginalization. The particularities of their rejection is likewise left underexamined by Elam insofar as it falls beyond the scope of her intentions, but the nub of their criticism, as she remarks, stems from what they take to be Fry's blindness towards contexts that possess a determinate significance for the meaningful contents of artworks. Setting aside the accuracy of

New Art History's critique of Fry and formalism, or at least the accuracy of Elam's summarization of that critique, it is notable that the age-old but ultimately fallacious distinction between form and content makes an appearance here.

It is good to see, however, that Elam's refuses to codify that distinction, although she arguably comes close to doing so. Immediately following the above passage, she writes: 'But there is still a place for the assessment of style and quality, and for writing which sharpens perceptions by attempting to find words for elusive visual characteristics. Such critical skills are in no way incompatible with historical analysis, as can be seen in the writings of a few present-day art historians'.<sup>3</sup> Her refusal is evident in her argument that art historians can, and do, employ writing as a heightened mode of attention comported towards the visual qualities of artworks. But the reason why she nearly maintains the form/content dyad is that a certain 'and' remains visible in her defence. For instance, she highlights in her closing words the subtitle of Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italian Painting: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. As she notes, although 'social history' has often been elevated above 'pictorial style' by many of those influenced by Baxandall, one can do social history *and* attend to pictorial style; and it is worth doing so (they are 'in no way incompatible'). Yet this point could be made more strongly insofar as, for Baxandall, form, content, and

context are essentially bound together, therefore suggesting there is no possibility of doing something like ‘social history’ and something else like ‘pictorial style’. They are inseparable in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Conjoining ‘social history’ to ‘pictorial style’ (or ‘historical explanation’ to ‘pictures’) is not an ‘and’ but rather an ‘of’, and this difference is crucial to acknowledge when considering what Baxandall takes to be his vital inheritance from Fry.

The remaining three parts of the book republish numerous texts produced by Fry. For the most part, they are anterior to Fry’s legendary organization of the *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* exhibition, on show at the Grafton Galleries from 8 November 1910 until 11 January 1911. If the success of that exhibition has misleadingly presented Fry within art-historical consciousness as one of the harbingers of modernism within the British context, then the inclusion of these texts demonstrates how important the Renaissance was to Fry’s comprehension of art. Indeed, if formalist criticism has often been taken as deeply associated with growing formalist tendencies in art practice – as if it were a critical approach continuous with and internal to its objects – here is a salutary reminder that, even if that association is broadly correct, we need to be wary of overly subscribing to it. In reading through Fry’s essays, as included in Elam’s book, any apparent tension between Renaissance and formalist criticism lessens if not dissolves. The fact, too, that these essays



are republished and accompanied by excellent reproductions allows readers to measure their own experiences against Fry's formalist accounts. Take, for instance, Fry's influential discussion of Alesso Baldovinetti's *Portrait of a Lady in Yellow*, penned in 1911 and republished in Elam's book (*plate 1*).<sup>5</sup> Here carefully reproduced pictorial details have been selected that bolster Fry's argument and help justify his method in a manner simply impossible when the article was first published in *The Burlington Magazine*.

Rose's book, *Art and Form*, has a more expansive tale to tell, about formalism's centrality within British art writing; Fry is by no means the only figure discussed here, but he is the lynchpin of Rose's account. By intention, Rose is attempting not only to elucidate Fry's theories or even to track their actual afterlife, but also examine their continued pertinence within and for our contemporary situation. To that degree it represents a contrasting example to *Roger Fry and Italian Art*, though both books serve well as each other's companion. The central argumentative thread of *Art and Form* is that Fry's version of formalism has consistently been misapprehended as a retreat from the world by means of a tunnel-visioned and literal-minded attentiveness to the material forms of art. Against such a picture, Rose contends that the opposite is true: the ambition of formalism for Fry was to reconstitute the myriad entwinements between an artwork's form, historical context and its

manifestation of the artist's 'personality'. Moreover, such reconstitutions could only happen in the formalist critic's trained experience, therefore securing the intertwining of critic and artwork and hence also a sharing of their worlds.

In order to give this argument solid foundations, it is necessary to remove certain obstacles from the immediate terrain. Some of the misunderstandings of Fry, Rose suggests, originate from Fry's positions being conflated with simplified readings of his Bloomsbury colleague Clive Bell's book *Art*, published in 1914. Its adumbration of 'significant form' functioned to contrast the purposiveness of forms in art against the 'unintendedness' of forms in nature. Moreover, significant form was defined as 'the one quality common to all works of visual art'<sup>6</sup> and required no prior knowledge on the beholder's part. Crucially, it was this that would initiate aesthetic experience; artworks requiring any such knowledge, indeed, were derided as being weighed down with information. Significant form was thus more hinged to the embodying of human *agency* than human *meaning* per se. As Rose notes, Bell's detractors thus inverted 'significant form', positing it as actually meaning 'in-significant' form; that is to say, devoid of significance, meaning. Such criticisms were extended to Fry, too, as if he held the same notions as Bell. Compounding all this was the sense that aesthetic experience, no matter how

pleasurable, was similarly 'in-significant' and detached from the world of human meaning.

Various aspects of Fry's and Bell's ideas are, at least loosely, derived from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* via the mediating influences of figures such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Madame de Staël. Rose mentions Kant a few times in passing, but it is a shame that this dimension is not explored further. Admittedly, Fry was consciously haphazard in his philosophical commitments, unsystematically taking what he needed from key thinkers at a given moment. Consequently, it would be churlish to condemn him for not being as engaged in Kant as he could have been. Nonetheless, we perhaps ought to devote more space to tackling this matter. For instance, what might Kant look like after Fry?

The Kantian association also compels extra deliberation since its significance ranges beyond Fry and has been highlighted by formalism's adherents and detractors alike. Famously, Clement Greenberg invoked Kant in the opening paragraph of his essay 'Modern Painting', though the reference was to the introduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason* rather than the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Even so, that reference sets the stage for his fairly muddled readings of Kant's aesthetics in the late 1960s and beyond.<sup>7</sup> And, in a classic instance of the baby being discarded with the bathwater, Greenberg's critics likewise muddled his criticism with Kant's

aesthetics with the consequent marginalization of Greenberg, modernism, formalism, Kantian philosophy, and aesthetics from the domain of post-Greenbergian (and postmodernist) art criticism. Such conflations and simplifications have, in general, largely been disentangled at this point in time to the extent that – even if the compass of this review necessarily falls too short – it is nonetheless possible to gesture in the approximate direction in order to comprehend how Kant has been used and abused within art criticism.

The notion of ‘disinterested judgment’ as the precondition of aesthetic experience has long been taken as the crux where Kantian aesthetics and formalist criticism alloy together. We certainly see something like this in Bell’s significant form as well as corresponding arguments in Fry’s writing and in Berenson’s connoisseurship. Additionally, it has frequently been used to support an ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ manner of attending to artworks and their visual forms. This, however, evinces a reading of Kant’s aesthetics so partial that it is almost a misreading. Disinterested judgment has often been taken as the foundation of formalism, to be sure, but what is generally missed here is that disinterested judgment is a mode of *reflective* judgment. Kant contrasts determinate judgments and reflective judgments: the former is a judging activity whereby we have preestablished concepts, rules or criteria that render the judgment possible and guarantees its success (or failure); the

latter is a judging activity in which concepts, rules or criteria have not been previously established and potentially cannot be established. However, the judging activity can and does happen all the same.

This point bears emphasizing in the present context because reflective judgments do not easily underwrite or constitute quasi-scientific notions of objectivity, let alone automatically coincide with the subsequent emergence of positivism. To be sure, Kant's example of a castle to be judged aesthetically does suggest that the criterion of disinterestedness underpinning the judgment *qua* aesthetic judgment can be *willed*, as if one can deliberately elect to view the castle in a neutral manner and thereby bracket ethico-political considerations.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, we can see from this perspective how, on the one hand, some formalists can envisage their procedures as akin to the neutral standpoint of a scientific attitude, and why, on the other hand, formalism's detractors castigated formalism and its putative neutrality for its intentional sidelining of other considerations taken as non-aesthetic. In fact, neither position really captures Kant's comprehension of disinterestedness and aesthetic judgment insofar as they mutually overemphasize agency and neutrality. Basically, for Kant, disinterestedness is an intrinsic structural element of aesthetic judgment since such judgments are reflective and betoken the complex, uncertain relations we have to whichever

object has *provoked* the judgment. Disinterestedness is not a neutralizing mental operation we choose to perform, whereby we suspend our preoccupations and stakes so as to then enact an aesthetic judgment. That bonds have been forged conjoining formalism with Kantian aesthetics has ultimately resulted in a dual misunderstanding negatively impacting formalism and Kantian aesthetics alike.

This issue is worth dwelling on because it should alter how we grasp the relationship between formalism and aesthetics and, at the same time, it has bearing on the questions regarding communication that Rose addresses. Communication is tied to a community of speakers and listeners, and Kant's and Fry's respective ideas approach each other here: they both recognise how aesthetic experiences generate serious difficulties in finding words for them and in knowing whether the words we do find will 'stick' to the object. Both Kant and Fry construe language not so much as a transparent vehicle for communication but rather a difficult condition of our attachment to art. Crucially, Kant's emphasis upon reflective judgment pushes him to raise important questions about the representativeness of the persons judging, the way they speak for a given community, as well as the communicability or shareability of judgment that is not based on pre-existing criteria. Aesthetic judgments for Kant are uttered in the first-person plural, and the difficulty accompanying that thought is very much integral to Kant's

arguments. The voicing and sharing of an aesthetic judgment can be comprehended as the moment when a community is discovered, a discovery of what we do share. And what is shared is the finitude of our experiences and what is discovered is whether our finitude resonates or can be acknowledged by the experiences of another subject.<sup>9</sup>

Despite Rose's occasional emphasis on scientific objectivity, there are enough clues in his book to indicate that Fry perhaps had a similar viewpoint. More fundamentally, though, Rose argues that Fry's formalism was not an escapist and isolating focus upon the artwork to the exclusion of other criteria. On the contrary, such focused attention was a means of making contacts between artwork, self, audience, and artistic personality. Rose writes:

But in its concern for contact with the inner lives of others, its desire to come to terms as honestly as possible with one's inner experience, and the longing for the description of that personal experience that grounds communal enterprise, Fry's criticism, in its own way, attempted to be as open to the world of human concerns as it thought possible to be.<sup>10</sup>

Phrased in this way, it becomes readily understandable that someone like Greenberg cannot quite follow Fry's example. Instead, the proper continuation of that lineage can be traced in the dialogues between the likes of Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell within the American situation, and between figures like Baxandall and Timothy J. Clark in the British context.<sup>11</sup> Once again, the divisions rending form, content, and context apart seem strikingly problematic. Formalism, at its best, aims not to oppose form and content but rather to apprehend form as *embodied* content, and content as something that must be embodied as form. This is one of the key ideas that Rose makes visible in Fry. Whether Fry succeeded or not is a matter that can only be tested and retested in our own experiences. But both Elam's and Rose's books enjoin us to appreciate the ambitions underpinning formalism and to take pains to understand how it has been caricatured.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism*, University Park, 2019, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Elam, *Roger Fry and Italy*, London, 2019, 144-145.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 145

<sup>4</sup> Note how the subtitle of Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italian Painting: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* is rephrased, as if to clear away misunderstandings, in his later *Patterns of*



*Intention: On The Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Fry, 'On a Profile Portrait by Baldovinetti' (1911) in Elam, *Roger Fry and the Italians*, 210-212.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Bell, *Art*, London, 1914, 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in *Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-94. Also see his collection of seminars published as *Homemade Aesthetics: Observations on Art and Taste*, Oxford, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge, 2002 (1790).

<sup>9</sup> For a related discussion that makes clear the conjunctions amid Kant and the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, see Timothy Gould, 'The Audience of Originality' in *Essays on Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Paul Guyer and Ted Cohen, Chicago, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, *Art and Form*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Melville has written exemplary texts on several of these writers and has underscored how their writings exhibit an alternative understanding of 'objectivity', of their writings being conditioned by and unfolding an art object in its specificity. See his essays 'Description' and 'Positionality, Objectivity, Judgment' in *Seams: Art as a Philosophical Context*, ed. by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Amsterdam, 1996, 41-60 and 68-88. Also important is Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago and London, 2010.