

Technological Utopia versus Cultural Dystopia – Discussing Peripheral Modernisms and Modern Cultural Identities in Finland after the Second World War

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This paper discusses the discourse on Modernism and modern art in Finland after the Second World War. At the core of the discussion are the ideas of the art critic Einari J. Vehmas (1902–1980), who has been considered the most influential writer of the post-War period up to the early 1960s.

A powerful modernisation process in Finland culminated in the 1960s with rapid industrialisation accompanied by migration from the rural countryside to the cities. Parallel to this, post-War Finnish art history has been characterised by narratives of heroic modernist ‘breakthroughs’ made by the young generations of artists and art critics in the 1950s and 1960s.

Modern Finnish design during that period, as well as modernist architecture, guided by the dominating character of Alvar Aalto, are the best known phenomena of that period internationally. Finnish visual art, too, was seen to be making important efforts to build a new artistic culture based upon international modernist ideas or ideologies, cherishing abstract forms and linking art with modern technology.

This period in Finnish art discourse was marked by a controversy within modernisms, echoing the contradiction that in French art criticism was referred to in terms of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ modernist styles and world views. There was a modernist orientation that drew on spiritual and metaphysical ideas, presented decades earlier by e.g. Kandinsky, and conversely, a rationalist modernism trend leaning on purist, often geometric abstraction, represented by artists such as Vasarely, and promoted by Denise René’s art gallery in Paris and publications such as the French art magazine *Art d’Aujourd’hui*.

Vehmas’ conception of modern European art was rooted in the vitalist and spiritual texts of Kandinsky and the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who underlined intuition and instinct as the basis of epistemic systems. Vehmas interpreted the new art of the turn of the 1960s as a representation of a fundamentally modern experience of loss and disintegration, a deep dystopia and melancholia of the 20th century.

The idealist idea or metaphor of modern art as pointing a way towards a better future, where violence and destruction could be left behind, was thereby markedly polarised. It seems, that during the 1960s in Finland the role of modern art as a discursive topos of mourning, suggested by Vehmas, was superseded by a more rationalist orientation, committed to technological and economical evolution.