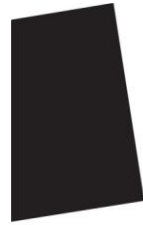


Jaime Gili: COMMA 04

Essay by Barry Schwabsky



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Further Adventures in Modernism

When I met up with him recently, Jaime Gili happened to mention in passing, but ruefully, the fact that just about everyone who writes about his work sooner or later has to say something about “the failure of modernism”. I wonder if he noticed me wincing, for I too, reviewing an exhibition of his several years ago, had touched on the same topic. Well, not in just those words, mind you. But detecting an elegiac mood in Gili’s meditations on the fate of an officially sanctioned abstract art in his native Venezuela, I proposed that “the artist whose heritage is a failed utopia might be more fortunate than the heir to one that still offered hope”.

Really, modernism has always harboured opposing desires. For every artist who has dreamed of being the Samson who pulls down the academy at all cost or has simply dreamed of pursuing an idiosyncratic intuition to its most logical and extreme and therefore most irrational end, there has been another whose every effort has been to found a new academy, a school for the end or the beginning of history, perhaps even embodying what Ad Reinhardt once called “the true museum’s soullessness, timelessness, airlessness and lifelessness”, but more often allied to ideas of progress than of stasis. Sometimes that progress was envisioned as reform, sometimes as revolution. For every Dada there was a Bauhaus, and sometimes the same artist belonged sometimes to one movement, sometimes the other. Art has been a project for the total transformation of society, and a specialist, quasi-technical endeavour to criticise and thereby refine its own criteria; one of these conceptions of art may be realistic, the other mired in illusion, but which is which? In retrospect, modernism may teach us that we do not know how its failure could be defined. Every breakdown of modernism is, from another and arguably equal valid viewpoint, internal to it, a fulfilment.

Thus, the decrepitude of a state-sponsored modernism such as Venezuela experienced in the post-War era should merely be seen as an opening for a modernism that would be free of the limits, and of what might be seen as the unfulfillable responsibilities, of an entirely public and rational art. For Gili, the story is not over: “The European modernist project may have failed or ended” he concedes, “but not elsewhere: in South America there are still many cities to build, and it may be something sustainable from an ecological point of view.” In any case, while many outstanding artists have taken a dogmatically polemical stance on one side or the other of the many debates that have constituted the history of modernism, their art has more typically sustained its contradictions in an inextricable tension, experienced sometimes as painful,

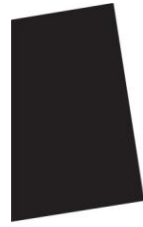


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sometimes as pleasurable. In my view the greatest of the Venezuelan modernists was Gego (Gertud Goldschmidt)—though Gili’s own primary reference seems to be Carlos Cruz-Diez—and since I’ve already quoted myself once I might as well do so again: In her art she “constantly wrestled with the relationships between order and disorder, unity and multiplicity, containment and dispersal, system and randomness, discipline and spontaneity.” Nor was she alone in this, but more to the point, she represents a beginning and not an ending.

Take away the quotation marks, and I could say the same thing about Jaime Gili: His art constantly wrestles with the relationships between order and disorder, unity and multiplicity, containment and dispersal, system and randomness, discipline and spontaneity. Probably the only way to fail in this game is to be boring, and Gili’s work is never that. It always contains the potential for exploration, for discovery. It is expansive. Gili is in the strictest sense a painter, and his art expresses itself fluently within the limits of the portable canvas rectangle: There, within those four edges, we can experience the dynamism and ebullience of Gili’s continuing adventures in modernism, but also the work’s strange and sometimes unnerving sense of catching the viewer up in something like that timelessness and airlessness that Reinhardt proposed as the true milieu of all art worthy of the name but which most of us, I suspect, cannot help finding a bit eerie. For most painters, those limits are, most of the time, enabling. Gili, though, cannot help letting his work spread far beyond them. It spills out onto the walls and floor and ceiling and sometimes even further. Indeed, one of his current projects is meant to cover what its sponsors have touted as “the largest canvas for public art ever developed”, at the Sprague Energy tank farm in Portland, Maine—261,000 square feet (about 24,250 square meters) of surface on the sides and tops of a series of massive industrial tanks, still in operation. “I would like to see paintings take over cities”, Gili has said. In lieu of that, for the moment, he is planning what just might be the first painting to be visible to extraterrestrials.

By that standard, *Mashrabiya*, Gili’s commission for Bloomberg SPACE is pretty self-contained, as are his previous large-scale installations in London and elsewhere, such as *Ruta Rota*, for which he covered much of the exterior of 5 Cheapside last summer. In contrast to the project for Maine, *Mashrabiya* is not about covering a surface. Of course, in the most literal sense it does involve that, since the material to be used is vinyl applied to the office building’s windows looking onto the atrium. But for that very reason it deals with transparency or translucency whereas painting in its conventional form can only deal with opacity except as an illusion. With *Mashrabiya*, it seems, Gili aims at finding a way for painting to fulfil its vaulting aspirations not simply by expanding itself to encompass its physical context—and Gili is not always content to do this in the most comfortable way: His recent exhibition at Alajandra von Hartz Gallery, Miami, included not only a 60-foot-long wall painting but, more to the point, “four paintings taller than the space” that had to be wedged at an angle between floor and ceiling—but also by undoing itself as a material practice. “No need to paint because it is already a painting” Gili explained to me in an e-mail, relating it to other recent paintings of his (on canvas, painted by hand in the studio) which differ from many of his previous ones in their polycentricism—their multiplication and dispersion of compositional nodes, organisational centres.



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To speak of the organisation of the painting, in modernism, is always somehow to speak of the organisation of collective energies in daily life—that is, of society. Despite everything, Gili still holds to this position, which to some may, in retrospect, seem rather arbitrary—though it may be that by holding at a level of generality greater than that which some of his precursors would have allowed, he is hedging his bets: “In my opinion,” he has said, “modernity is a spiritual state, the willingness to work alongside others in order to attain a specific goal, beyond mere formalities”. We can wonder what political stance is involved in making art for a working industrial plant or information-age office building, but whatever the answer is, it has nothing to do with nostalgia. What is perfectly comprehensible to nearly everyone today is that the illusion that an invisible hand is at work benignly shaping our destinies is one that we can no longer afford. Our survival depends on our ability to undertake collective projects that we have collectively and consciously chosen. Every form of enterprise is a reservoir of collective experience, and there is none that is a priori irrelevant to our future undertakings. Art can at least remind us that modernism is the future or nothing is.

Barry Schwabsky

Barry Schwabsky is an American art critic and poet living in London. He writes regularly for The Nation and for Artforum, where he is also co-editor of international reviews.