

**PHILIP JOHNSON**

Writing of another reactionary modernist, Wyndham Lewis, Frederic Jameson comments that ideology “is the subject’s attempt to map himself into a historical/narrative process that excludes him, and is non-representable and non-narrative” (12). Although we think of Johnson as a formalist, his earliest and most heartfelt work is a self-therapy based on narratives of modernity, modernity as a perpetual revolt. Some narratives were sociopolitical, some reified “the machine,” and some were art-historical. It was art history, ambiguously understood as both the history of form and the history of the artist’s place in society, which gave Johnson his strongest sense of self.

### **Art History**



he chose at Harvard, falling into alienation and panic, Johnson could use art history to prove that outcasts would triumph.

### **Battle**

Johnson had another arena of battle. Barr believed that those institutions that marginalized the “refusés”—art museums, critical discourse, or “architects’ leagues”—would have to be attacked (Barr, *Defining Modern Art* 52-53). Many of Johnson’s texts before 1934 are in fact not art-historical discourse, but aggressive weapons against those already making it. Occasionally he wrote about a building, but essentially Johnson attacked texts. His targets included Sheldon Cheney, author of a popular book on modernism, whom Johnson called too indiscriminating; critics and historians who called the Art Deco skyscraper “modern;” and reviewers of his own “Rejected Architects,” who called the work shown “functionalist” instead of examples of a “style.”<sup>1</sup> Attacking a text with a countertext meant attacking decadent authority. Johnson loaded these slight but aggressive essays with the professional terminology of the architectural historian—“pier-buttressing,” “battering,” “corbel tables”—demonstrating his right to strike at the old guard in the terms of its hegemony (Johnson, *Writings* 40-41).

It is in his critique of critiques of “Rejected Architects” that Johnson writes of the “universal [...] romantic love for youth in revolt.” Johnson used the trope of a rebel generation in several shows and catalogues (Riley, “Portrait” 51-55). There are several different contexts this would have had for Johnson. One was Barr’s statement of the modern art meta-narrative as not rejection but revolution; another was Barr’s

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<sup>1</sup> The most significant of Johnson’s polemical pieces are “Modernism in Architecture,” *New Republic*, 18 March 1931; “The Architecture of the New School,” *Arts and Architecture* (1935) *Crucial Moments of Architecture*

belief that change in art, at least modern art, was generational (Barr, *Defining Modern Art* 29). Johnson turns these into a historical narrative, one that lays out the structure and spirit of his time. This spirit is not one of “truth in revolt” or “the gifted in revolt,” but Youth, calling up vitality and impulse. The narrative of modern culture as a culture of “revolt” foregrounded unthinking impulse as a weapon. Narratives of “youth in universal revolt” led Johnson back to ecstasy, into an erotics of revolt.

It also led him close to fascist discourse. “Giovinezza”—“Youth”—was a rallying cry of Mussolini’s Black Shirts, and the trope of political violence as vital impulse was widespread in the European Right (Jameson 171-172; Wohl 72ff, 175ff). Johnson’s friend of this period, art critic Helen Appleton Read, began equating the architecture of a young postwar Germany with the energies of the Hitler movement around 1931. In one piece she wrote that the Nazis, “whose ideology has appealed so strongly to youth,” should embrace modernism, “Youth and radicalism in the arts being almost synonymous terms” (Read). Johnson would make the same equation in his 1933 essay “Architecture and the Third Reich,” and it was Read who took Johnson to his first Hitler rally (Johnson, *Writings* 54; Johnson, “Interview;” Schulze 89-90).

However, Johnson did not become politically active at this time, but applied fascist rhetoric to art. He belonged to a Harvard circle around Barr, including Hitchcock, Lincoln Kirstein, Everett Austin, and Edward Warburg (Schulze 34-39, 58-64, 91-93). Almost all of these men, according to memoirs and recollections, felt psychically dislocated and socially marginalized. They felt that psychic dislocation could be cured through the coming fusion of art and life. Barr showed them how to do this by writing modern art’s history and explaining it to the public. Bringing radical form into mainstream consciousness, showing it was part of an ordered sequence, they would de-marginalize the Other, including themselves.<sup>2</sup> These “rejects” were marginal now, but could rest serene in their Otherness, knowing it would soon become history.

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading, see Fox Weber, and Steven Watson chapters 6 and 8. Watson emphasizes that many of these men were homosexual, a fact noted by several historians and commentators. Attempts to work out a group dynamic for this coterie along psychoanalytic, gender stud-

Almost all of these men, Johnson included, became something more than academic historians. “Empresario” is a weak word for the spirit in which they, and above all Johnson, made their fight for modernism a public fight. In Johnson’s case, this stemmed from Barr’s belief that the general public, not an avant-garde coterie, was the natural constituency for art. Yet it also meshed with the belief held by almost all fascist ideologues, that the revolutionary elites (or marginal men) who will triumphantly end history are doing it for the good of the masses. The battles of “revolutionary youth” will be rapturously watched, from below, by a mass that is itself (passively) transformed by the spectacle. The leader of

coming of an old guard—the forms of an establishment, or even the avant-garde forms of earlier movements—by “rebellious youth.”

### **The Aporia of Machine Art**

Problems of rebellion and resolution infect Johnson’s first sustained narrative of art history, his “Historical Note” to the catalogue of the 1932 *Modern Architecture* show, a three-page condensation of Hitchcock and Platz (Barr, *Modern Architecture* 18-







not the machine, but the “style,” both expressive of and compatible with modernity’s machine processes, which formalist art-history methods located in the practice of representative artists (architects). In the 1934 MoMA show *Machine Art*, Johnson was steadied by Barr’s conviction—derived from Clive Bell’s *Art* (1913)—that pure form without narrative content (“significant form”) drove great art, and that therefore machinery, without representational purpose, could be the purest art. The notion of a state of pure aesthetic ecstasy, removed from the contingencies of the world, was deeply sympathetic to Johnson. Yet even here Johnson could not resist turning his historical narratives into “revolts”—against the individualism of Wright and the anti-aesthetics of functionalism in *The International Style*, and against the handicraft ethos of William Morris in the catalogue to *Machine Art* (Riley, *The International style* 55; Riley “Portrait” 55-61; Kantor 33, 307-309).

What mattered more to Johnson, the serenity of form or the ecstasy of textual battle? Or was it the security of art-historical narrative versus the thrill of radical form? For while crafting these texts, Johnson was increasingly preoccupied by the idea of becoming an architect, or at least acting as a patron of architecture. This fatally destabilized the routine of “revolt” he had mastered in his texts.

### **Architecture and the Texts of the Body**

Failing in college as a thinker and a sexually “normal” man, Johnson abandoned the mind for the ecstatic body in space. However, the body in architectural space, in the spaces of Johnson’s own time, had to be approached through an impersonal, limited, order-enforcing architecture. This had to be readable as a text of history, since mastering



not experienced in space. Johnson also explained Mies's stylistic signature as "design in planes." That is, rich materials are reduced to two-dimensional surfaces, *signifiers* of the physical instead of *vehicles* of it. Mies's spatial radicalism is turned into something for the connoisseur to look at from a distance: a text that proclaims the importance of the physical, without genuinely acting on it (qtd. in Barr, *Defining Modern Art* 114, 117).<sup>7</sup>

By 1934 Johnson was himself attempting to create such forms, designing apartments for friends that imitated Mies's interiors, using "planes" of floor-to ceiling silk curtains over wall-to-wall windows; he took, illegally given his lack of training or registration, to calling himself an architect in print (Schulze 105-106). But the dilemma was whether the architectural body or the art-historical text, the awakening of the senses or their sublimation in narratives, would be more gratifying. He was told that he could master neither. The leading Schinkel scholar in Germany blasted the Persius project, saying Johnson was undertrained to write texts. Mies himself damned Johnson for dealing in "fashion," not "building," oblivious to the deeper revolutions of modernism (Schulze 89; Pommer 144-145). From either side, those for whom he revolted told him he could not lead them.

So in 1934 Johnson took the action latent in his ideology of youth. The narratives of machine architecture made way for the meta-narrative behind them, the politico-economic structure of modernity—as shown in the texts of Werner Sombart, which Johnson translated, and American fascist Lawrence Dennis, whom Johnson befriended. In December 1934 Johnson left MoMA to found an American fascist movement he called "Youth and the Nation." It took him six years to find that he could not master fascism's texts and that he could not resist architecture. In 1940 he began architectural training, turning Johnson "the historian" into Johnson "the architect."

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<sup>7</sup> That Johnson interpreted Mies's work in terms of his own self-therapeutics does not necessarily make his comments incorrect. Recent scholarship, making next to no use of Johnson's writings, foregrounds the effect in Mies's 1920s work of "appearance" over bodily reality (see Mertins 132-133). Johnson's difficulties, in his 1947 Mies monograph, in reconciling his interpretation with Mies's post-emigration obsession with the "factuality" of the steel I-beam are beyond the scope of the present essay.

While Johnson's later career is not at issue here, it should be mentioned that his mastery of texts continued to bring him power that his designs alone could not always accrue to him. His scholarly study of Mies legitimized not only the subject's work but Johnson's own, as he began work on his Miesian Glass House. The spoken text largely replaced the written one as a means of attack and a source of power; in lectures, in front of patrons, and in media interviews, Johnson the rebel and historical expert "shocked, charmed, amused and amazed" colleagues and clients at the highest ranks of architecture culture (Blake 9). Johnson's power in the profession increased as he lost every revolutionary conviction except one: his devotion to architecture as not a tool or a text but a monument, an authoritative and ecstasy-inducing work of art.

As a "revolutionary," an avant-gardist, the young Johnson is a kind of text himself, or at least a textbook case. He seems to live out O. K. Werckmeister's comments on the fundamental elitism of the avant-garde paradigm, its origins in intellectuals' and artists' self-vision as a new ruling class. He exemplifies avant-garde style as therapeutic counterattack, "a substitute self," "compensatory therapy for the self defeated by society" (Werckmeister 857, Kuspit 18-19). The fact that Johnson's therapy, his rebellion, and his pretensions of mastery came out through texts on architecture made him the right man at a crucial time. He appeared when American architecture culture had lost its main narrative thread, Beaux-Arts Classicism. In the absence of American buildings in radical European modes, texts and pictures offered virtually the only entry point into the new architecture. Johnson operated as a framer of narratives about it, but he brought to these narratives the erotic energy of his own therapeutics. In the years after World War II, even as his "rebellion" collapsed of its own contradictions, Johnson's paradigms of youthful adventure and historical authority brought both excitement and reassurance to the business of putting modernism into mainstream practice. The therapeutics of his first campaign of rebellion failed Johnson himself, but by the time that happened, his narratives of form and history had been implanted in American architecture culture.

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