AN URGENCY FOR METAMODERNISM IN AN AFFECTUAL STRUCTURE OF REASON

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This paper will examine metamodernism in the context of an urgency of debate in defining the differences between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic structures in contemporary art by the critical term 'universal reckoning'. Discussion will argue three key points for metamodernism, which are: metamodernism was defined in a pre-pandemic context as an ontological assessment of affect from a structure of feeling; post-pandemic assessment is functioned through an epistemological approach from a structure of reason; and that an urgency for metamodernism to move into the later informs relevance for aesthetics, the subject, and conceptualism in contemporary art.

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges that contemporary art now faces in a post-pandemic era is what to do with the assessment of the subject as a metamodern affect? Discussion hereafter will frame a context that disregards the viewer as part of such considerations, to instead focus on the mechanics of a theoretical model about the subject, disengaged from and by an audience. Affect will be considered part of the internal relationships in the subject, but not as a spectacle beyond the affectual experience. As much of what we understand to be metamodern was digressed during

the debates of the Dutch and Nordic schools of Metamodernism in the 2010s (Vermeulen, van der Akker, Gibbons 2010, 2014, 2017), awareness of metamodernism has already established recognition in the arts after the demise of postmodernism - and with this Fukuyama's claim of the death of history (1998, 90), the ideological global shift against material capitalism, and for artists, the state of a 'super-hybridity' expanded from Bloch's 'non-simultaneity or asynchronicity.' (Heiser, 58)

An attention here is on the mechanics of understanding the oscillation of a singularity and a relativism acting independently and without influence. This, indeed, has been a unique occurrence given that modernist essentialism (Storm, p.3) was predominantly constructed around the singularity of an absolute running parallel to layer half of the second industrial revolution. Postmodernism assessed this absolute (Best, Kellner, 1997) through irony, scepticism, and cynicism responding as a cultural relativism parallel to Derrida as a deconstruction and Foucault as a poststructuralism. In much the same way, metamodernism has responded again as a human turn (Holbraad, Pedersen, 2017) but this time as an observation of affect from an oscillation between both the absolute essentialism of modernism and the cultural relativism of postmodernism. One might argue that in the current era of metamodernism, we are anecdotally surmounted to a fixation on feelings and phenomenological inquiry that, as a structure of feeling proclaims, are inextricably linked together at the forefront of a set of ideas explicating a subjective and objective nexus, comparative to, and dependent on, an ontological framework of affect. This, such, is formulated as both a field of research throughout critical theory, philosophy, literature and contemporary art, and observations to the necessitated demands of a society in self-anointed crisis (Zizek 2020).

The dearth of responding critical literature has flourished through the early work established by Vermeulen (2010) et al, revealing a separation and, also, a disparity from former postmodern structures in art that draws attention to feelings, as I argued, was a new emergence of a romanticism in metamodernity. On this key point are the ever present qualities of a romanticism that has, at least for several hundred years, started from the late Renaissance, to, in particular, the rejection of *Aufklärung*, or German Enlightenment, in the treatises of early German romantics

from the 19th century landscape school of painting. This situates the immersives of hope and sincerity that when periodically examined arrives after a point of mass trauma, whether this be war, economic collapse, plague or transferred illness, corporatocracy, and theocratic or governmental oppression. When, say, romanticism appears as a populous trend in art, it reflects the emotive experiences of the society around it, not unlike what early *Frühromantik* thought as 'the life of the individual, society, and the state' (Beiser, p.41) in an aesthetic autonomous set of moral and political ethics.
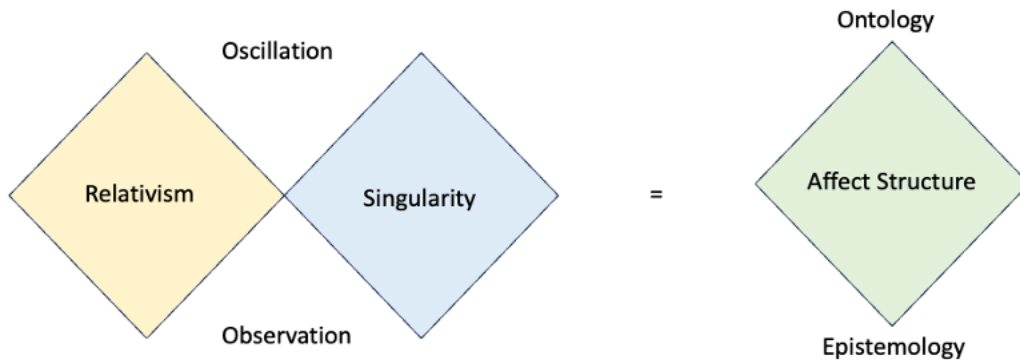

Figure 1: modelling of a metamodern affect

Determinate to such, I argue, is a reflectance in contemporary art of the return to romanticist ontology, the need for comfort from realism - and the rejection of it mainly from early anti-aufklärung sentiments from painters including Friedrich's *Moonrise by the Sea* (1822) - and the defence against non-truths and injustices. More the prelude to the social turn of the mid nineteenth century evoking socialist literature from Marx (1850) and Engel (1848), the early romantics parallel twentieth and twenty-first century ideologies, as evidenced in human sciences across numerous fields, from, especially, the 1960s onwards, as a collective feeling that something needs to be put right through evangelical inclinations of the self and social equity. Recent examples of this type of art are located in non-fungible token and blockchain art (Beyer), especially in Beeple's series *Everydays* (2021), Damian Hirst's series *The Currency* (2021), and *CryptoKitties* (2017) as an example of many, notwithstanding. Metamodernism, though, and the

discussions built around it, are of a pre-pandemic vintage addressing the concerns thus, then, prescriptive to a structure of feeling that we've had prior to Covid lockdowns and global martial law. These events, later prompting larger collective turns, to which I will refer to as social jolts, changed the way we perceived the realism of, say, government and societal freedoms in democracy, for example, to galvanise the fact that there is no such thing as guaranteed freedom of movement in classic democracy, where democracy in itself is more descriptive of, in the case of Australia where I live and work, forced electoral processes to enable its citizens to freely vote under a legal compliance to do so for representatives who will then impose such governance, compliance and laws upon its electorate, and not necessarily as a preconceived belief that democracy is a utopic freedom of movement which, as we now know after experiencing martial law from covid lockdowns, is a naive assumption of fictitious entitlement.

Post-pandemic contemporary art has transformed into what Heiser termed a hyper-singularity (Heiser, p.55) first 'described a set of artistic practices involving the use of many hugely diverse cultural sources to create work' (Heiser 2010) begging the question - can metamodernism structurally survive in a post-pandemic society ordered through the transformative effects of zetetic knowledge; that is to say, gained knowledge proceeding by enquiry, competing against dark capitalism integrated with mass artificial intelligence, economic fragility, and the expectations of universal immediacy at a governance and sociability level? Our understanding and application of metamodernism in the arts is urgent to adapt in a post-pandemic world away from ontology and a structure of feeling, simply because these are now - as I propose - redundant for the subject and out of date to the society it once critiqued. The oscillation of relativism and singularity is still in place, but the resultant affect built around a structure of feeling is not. Key here is that what ended modernism was sign posted to the after thoughts and coming to terms with the Jewish holocaust in 1945 (Warden, p.10); the end of postmodernism was sign posted to the era between the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the global financial crisis, and, as I argue, the same akin to the COVID-19 pandemic as the next social jolt in the progression of modernity.

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The affective turn (Clough, Halley) of the 1990s echoes much of the reckoning that's progressed in metamodernism I will refer to in the post-pandemic era as the beginning of a proto enlightenment era harking back to the several other instances of enlightenments proceeding a global pandemic – after the Black Death plague came the Early Modern Period, the English enlightenment proceeded the Great London plague, and high modernism, most notably embodied in the trajectory of Abstract Expressionism preceded the Spanish Flu - which intersects these particulars to be epistemological reading of metamodernism contained in a metamodern affect brought about by the first key term 'universal reckoning' or, the social need for rapid transformation accelerated by a sense of reason. In this are perpendicular elements based on pre-pandemic and post-pandemic cultural structures or 'models' for the subject. On the one hand, in a pre-pandemic context, such is represented by an ontology conceived as a structure of feeling. While on the other hand, a post-pandemic epistemology is a term I have developed within my critical practice as a structure of reason, as illustrated in Figure 3. Both models rely on an oscillation between relativism and singularity, but the nature of either is different in terms of what defines each approach versus the type of artwork artists embrace through their respective enquiries. Artwork in this sense becomes a litmus test of what's to come, and it's measured by what's publicly exhibited at major biennales and benchmark cultural websites like digital crypto platforms, particularly OpenSea.com as the centre point for global art repositories.
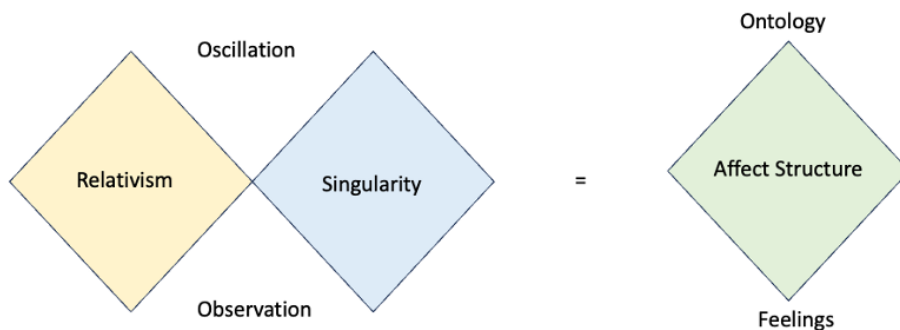

Figure 2: modelling of a structure of feeling

As Figure 2 represents a structure of feeling that is, as we know, argued to congeal the emotive aspects of experience within the mechanisms of oscillation, just as a structure of reason looks through epistemological modelling to gain knowledge separated by and from emotions. Debates by Storm (pp.235.209) deconstructing postmodernism scepticism in a discussion about zetetic knowledge expand at a structural level the differentiation of knowledge as epistemology. One might argue that zetetic knowledge and reason are both metamodern devices, but seek to gain affectual prominence in separate ways to ontology. The problem for such is that an ontological approach of considering affect in a post-pandemic structure faces barriers in assessing affect through the subject, compared to an epistemological approach of the same nature as knowledge, and therein rests the problem of romanticism, and with this, for ontology, in metamodern art.

Nested within this position are the effacements of affect itself, which, contrary to the debates of postmodernism, especially from Jencks (1996) and Deleuze (1983), position Alison Gibbons (2017) argument about metamodern affect by acknowledging that 'Jamieson's account of the postmodern, the loss of historicity, affect and depth are interrelated' (Gibbons p.83) as central to understanding this new turn from ontology. Moreover, affect as an affectual relationship in art between actions and emotions is the basis of observations by the critique of the metamodern subject through oscillative determinants located in the structure of its affect. Both the structure of feeling and a structure of reason access from both perspectives of an observational oscillation, yet never cross over to influence each other. I argue that observation, which leads to reckoning, is an undervalued mechanical element of metamodern art, which remains absent from debate if not ignored altogether. Recent critical dialogue centred around these conversations is echoed from Lee Konstantinou (pp.87-88) about affect in relational art, Nicoline Timmer's (pp.103-105) debate about solipsism and defencelessness, Gibbon's further work on subjectivity and affect after postmodernism, and Storm's commentary on 'process ontology' in 'making sense of anti-essentialism'.' (Storm, p.87)

Furthermore, the recollections of these observations contest a structural problem for metamodernism, because its entire base has been, by and large, an ontological way of articulating

aesthetics in the subject, whether digital or analogue media or flat dimensional images. The fact that metamodernism in art over the last twenty years had found a way to first interpret aesthetics beyond the demise of postmodernism was, I argue, definitive in its own structure of affect, identified as a standalone, dare I say, conceptual mechanism of the subject not necessarily being *from* the subject, *as* the subject, or even *with* the subject. Yet once deconstructed, a structure of feeling in art can only be an ontology in its framework, as there are no other philosophical formalisms capable of enacting the inclusiveness of feelings in determining affect in art. This structure is dislocated from any serious investigation of metamodernism since at least the early 2000s, simply because emotions and feelings in this context are not part of an epitome of assessment. The disadvantage with this is that ontology in metamodernism directly engages its audience, but the epistome, not to be confused with an episteme, engages the knowledge of reason before it reaches an audience.
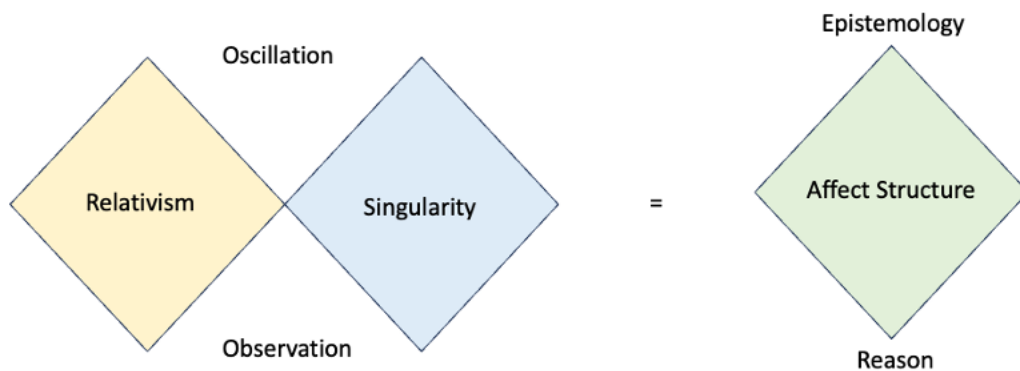

Figure 3: modelling of a structure of reason

A structure of reason is, more acutely, a condition that does not require an audience, contrary to, say, Audience Theory, because the mere presence of an audience itself denotes a relationship of emotion between the subject and the people experiencing the subject. A structure of reason is, exclusively, a critical structured model outside of an audience's position. Audiences *to* the subject in this kind of thought are to what artist Sue Beyer describes as 'the death of the

audience.' (Beyer, 2023) My investigation here seeks to examine a critical conceptuality regarding the artefact in the model, but not the people who would experience it when engaging with the subject.

Yet what I am proposing is to look beyond ontology to establish that there is, indeed, an urgent need to move past a structure feeling altogether, with the intention of reconciling an affectual state that, first, is applied beyond the postmodern as found in the work prior to, especially in Lyotard's grand narratives discussions (1979). To circumvent deduction, movement and being as any authentic romanticist notions are to be applied within this model, especially through the likes of painting, video art, and sculpture, the adjunct limitations on such are that these are, indelibly, digital and physical artefacts, and not the audiences engaging *with* artefacts. The artefact takes precedent, and audiences, I argue, are of no concern or value to such structures in this regard. They are, in any sense, an afterthought because when an audience gets involved with the subject of art, they bring emotion to the comprehension of such and thus, an expanded sense of ontology. Epistemological inquiry *of* the subject doesn't need that at all. Even Spinoza's view of knowledge from an epistemology attributed causation through his parallelism doctrine, which intersects a structure of reason, prompting a form of difference from a structure of feeling cited through causal ordering of the 'knowledge of causes – the knowledge *why* something happened, not merely *that* it happened.' (Hübner 2022)

The second point to be discussed asks what to do with metamodern affect once an epistome has been established for the subject? I argue that epistemology in metamodernism is not just a question of emotive exclusion but more so a modality of reason as authentic depth (Huber, Funk, pp.151-165) that defines definitive aspects of singularity notwithstanding to a relativist state of affect – for the artefact not the audience - that even in itself is transformative in the way the binary nature of an oscillation has to produce something in both subjective and objective reductions if its very nature and, more importantly, its concretisation of a theoretical model is defined with the start and end point that ontology and the search for being within a structure of feeling was incapable of expanding as a definitive sobered analysis of oscillations located within contemporary art and it's orbiting subsets. In the post-pandemic era, we need more than feelings

to have an enlightenment – we need knowledge in a turn (Raffnsøe, 2017) to apply reason after an ontology, not the feelings and comfort of an ontology in a perpetual state of reflection.

A definitive way to capture this reflection is a semantic defined by edges of a theoretical framework. These, of course, are the permissible limits, and by this, inferred as placing limits on a formulaic structure; to have a firm start and endpoint that's not open-ended to what a structure of feeling is, or to further discussion to an identifiable contextuality on a conceptual level. A structure of reason is ordered and solid, and there are key boundaries which make a structure of reason gated by possibility. The structure of reason is highly dictatorial, even dogmatically so, in prescribing what is and what is not within the mechanics of its own structural order. These have many limitations when coming from ontological perspectives, because this conflicts with any sense of ontological outcome in the subject. One aspect of the search of being that I've always argued and fought against is the vague arbitrariness of the state of the subject in art, which customises itself as harbouring the emotively dysfunctional – not as an audience or makers, but as what the subject creates and affords to an audience.

The problem for ontology in art, though, is the reduction of consistency in establishing periodic classifications of the absolute – and we find this as the prime directive of modernism in as much postmodernism critically assessed it by virtue. An example would be blurring the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism in oscillation away from 'phantom opposites' (Storm, p.25), or likewise a postmodernism and post-postmodernism or a neomodernism and a neo-metamodernity. Ontology invites what I term a non-offensive art ecology into a methodological structure – a painting that makes us feel happy, a drawing that neither challenges or agitates, an NFT illustrating an artists sense of emotional being or a quest in finding it; that aids and abets the idea of aesthetic vagueness through pictorial representation and, as such illustrates a conceptual flaw in aesthetics that often will approximate emotions in hierarchy and delegate them to what I have termed in the past is a cultural comforting as evidenced in the first years of the pandemic from the global search of being to find answers and comfort in a crisis that caught a global society by surprise and, arguably, by hostage.

As we now come out of the pandemic and back into a new versioned 'normal' of society, we are observing a reckoning in art to make decisions of the value of ourselves, rather than the values of the systems to which we have manufactured around art, such as economic, technological and bureaucratic governance. For example, the bureaucratic regulation of lifestyles has in effect created artworks and societies inclusive of these subjects that have little or no connection to biological human traits, as it does the causality of populous social ordering, which is an intertextuality of capitalism, privileged middle-class socialism, and non-secular transfixiation. And this is certainly reflected in the type of work produced during the pandemic, where many artists returned to more traditional forms of art, such as painting and craft, due to the limitations of technology and freedom of movement.

Indeed, I also returned to painting during the ongoing Covid lockdowns. The metamodern, as my practice aligns, has developed through logical states leading into and during the pandemic, but, as we now come out into a post-pandemic society, where there is a causality to move away from the ontological – simply because it doesn't achieve a knowledge of reason except to comfort insecurities and galvanise confidence through the subject - is to move into an emotional state of non-dependant romanticism. The realities far removed from utopic subjects in art have now landed in economic realities of recessions, rising employment, war, expanding inflation and higher interest rates, to name a few. When the economic realities of unsustainable cost of living impact artists at any social level, there are also retreats into who makes art and who doesn't. We've seen this during the pandemic with a privileged class who could stay at home to work and those who could not, and now artists through circumstance are divided into who can afford to be a working artist in the current economic climate and those who cannot. In contemporary art, this is personified by the growing genre called *zombie formalism* (Hegenbart) which is, in itself, large pictorial abstract paintings of paintings not necessarily of original works. These can be an artwork that has for certainty been painted by hand, but the resemblance of this painting is strikingly familiar. In a Baudrillardian context, copies of paintings termed a simulacrum are a middle ground during and after the pandemic, evidenced by masse examples of market and collector simulacra driven as facsimiles of the facsimiles of a facsimile, where paintings, sculptures and video art, for example, are now symbolic of the work of the collective 'other', to

the extent that the medium itself, and by medium I refer to a formalism within the subject, has changed. This is not unlike the affordances opposed to static artworks, where the sense of originality is no longer in question. The understanding of the subject has moved beyond that state to instead operate algorithms, for example, creating artworks to be analysed and digressed by other algorithms, which then propagate and propel the mechanism to make money. Therefore, it is geared towards dark capitalism as an autonomous economic system through a gigascale global autonomy, where AI makes artworks for other AIs, thus eliminating humans altogether.

The scale of such occurrence lends itself back to a structure of reason. Where a structure of feeling is no longer applicable in art because the search for being has been superseded by a mixture of dark capitalism collecting autonomy over the subject, not in the traditional sense of, say, a meme, but in terms of the structures they are manufactured within, is taking one subject, matching it with another, to form a third that in past years we've called a mashup. Contextualisation of memes, though, has not so much been politicised, but adapted through an ideology. This ideology in art is back to a mishmash of capitalism where artists want to express themselves outside the academy if there are transferable social rewards for doing so. This reward can come by currency in passive income from social approval, and the desire and popularity of or the desire to be an influencer nested through an arguable state of delusion and free, mass distributed technology to bolster narcissism. As an example, consider artist pages on Instagram to reconcile that popularity and metrics have become part of the intention of art itself, where popularity validates a successful agency of artworks in and outside the academy, and the removal of the singularity of art as an object, I would argue, is not as important as the meta values of the artwork integrated through digital distribution and visibility. If, say, a painter made an artwork of a painting, the metadata associated with that work holds more currency and meaning for the meme of the subject. I call this mirror of the subject a meme, because that's the function of its reflection, which is the subject. That's what the artwork is, once it becomes digitised and distributed, to render the originality of artworks null and void. And this is precisely what a structure of reason needs to address in part of this turn. Furthermore, the urgency for metamodernism is to address this point, which is unclear, aside from philosophical critical debates from, especially, the decline of postmodernism, which is now the hallmark of

metamodernity as a cultural data bank. Thus, the metadata which correlates this is attached to the objective and subjective work of art. So where are the key bodies of literature that critically engage with the subject in art through a structure of reason, and the answer is not within metamodern critique, at least not yet anyway. And this provides an urgency, as I've described, for metamodernism to react to these experiences. In all its effacements, recent and applied, to and relevant of a pre-pandemic context, especially in the 2010s, but not necessarily now, because we didn't have these issues in the gigascale of social trauma collectively worldwide than what we do now. Art through metamodernism has rapidly changed, and it's rapidly changed into areas that not even critics or galleries have comprehended to accept nor acknowledge. Moreover, metamodernism isn't available to address these issues in a way that is not from an ontological perspective. Whether we're examining key texts in the field, ontology can vocalise trauma, but structurally, its inability to gain and build reason from and beyond trauma is ineffective.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from this discussion reconcile that metamodernism as a cultural periodic critique needs to re-evaluate current literature, which remains structured as an ontological reading of an affectual state. A structure of feeling is one such mechanism to compound this result but as demonstrated, an epistemological reading as a structure of reason provides a different analysis. What remains for current debate is an absence of this kind of structure as, ontologically speaking, a structure of feeling is the widely accepted mechanism that defines the affectual mechanisms of metamodernism. Where these considerations are tasked is to consider the observations of a post-pandemic society mirrored through contemporary art that's evolved through the pandemic into an understanding of objective substantiates through reason and knowledge. If one considers the debates of affect from Konstantinon, Timer, and Gibbons, there is now room to expand metamodern dialogue away from subjective reading to authentic state. Then, such a reading of metamodernism responds in equal measure to the continued trajectory of modernity in a metamodern context, surmountable to a change in how the subject is assessed and determined by immersive relationships, between and from the subject. As this change of accessibility makes forward the ranges of affect experienced in the metamodern, a stronger and

far immediate sense of expansion for aesthetics in contemporary art has brought about a more delicate ongoing conversation not yet accepted, as the reshaping of metamodernism mirrors the transformative evolutions that occurred since the start of the pandemic and the unfolding decade ahead.

As art has, in a Romanticism sense, deferred to feelings through sentiment and allegory, the movements within this span have been instrumental in current art forms badged within a structure of feeling. Yet the epistemological approaches of reason in Western art have preceded ontological movements with formalisms, as it did in previous incarnations of ontology, to liken reason with realism and empirical thought. In metamodernism, this presents a potentiality to broaden its attention of affect away from emotion and sentiments. Reason, I argue, will shape this proto enlightenment into a new set of debates for the subject in art emerging now and undoubtedly into the future.

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