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Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism

Todd Cronan

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For nearly fifty years the humanities have been defined by a series of critiques: of the subject, of representation, of the visual, of modernism, of autonomy, of intention, of art itself. In their place various "materialities" have appeared: signs, identities, bodies, history, and works. *Against Affective Formalism* challenges these orthodoxies.

"What I am after, above all, is expression," Henri Matisse declared. Matisse believed that through the careful arrangement of line and color he could transmit his feelings directly to the minds and bodies of his viewers. Yet Matisse continually struggled with the reality that his feelings were misunderstood--or simply ignored--by viewers of his art. Matisse oscillates between a desire for expressive command over the viewer and a sense of the impossibility of making himself known.

Against Affective Formalism confronts modernism's dissatisfactions with representation. As Todd Cronan explains, a central tenet of modernist thought turns on the effort to overcome representation in the name of something more explicit in its capacity to generate bodily or affective experience. Henri Bergson was one of the most influential advocates of the antirepresentational impulse; his novel theories of memory and freedom gripped a generation of writers, philosophers, psychologists, and artists. Matisse and Bergson worked within and against the context of form and expression that remains in force today.

Writing in opposition to prevailing theories and assumptions about the relation of intention and form--most of which accept the "death of the author" as a basic fact of interpretation--Cronan argues that the beholder's response to art, outside a framework of intentionality, is irrelevant to a work's meaning. Intentions are not a matter of *method* at all: no letter, biography, document, archive, or key will recover an intention. What matters is that intentions make works of art different from objects in the world.

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