Modernism in Public

Rod Rosenquist and Alice Wood

In Greenwich Village between 1915 and 1916, Guido Bruno – publisher of work by Djuna Barnes, Alfred Kreymborg and Marianne Moore as well as one of the first exhibitors of Clara Tice – regularly opened his artist’s ‘garret’ on Washington Square to the public. ‘After paying 10 or 25 cents, depending on how business had been going, the sightseers entered a cluttered suite of rooms and beheld a dozen or more “struggling artists”: bearded young men contemplating half-finished paintings’.¹ The very notion of the artist’s garret, conveying a sense of private aesthetic contemplation or labour – Bruno appropriated the term because he ‘rather liked the intimacy of it’ – had become a tourist destination, a newly public space providing him with an income. His memories of this cultural space are, in the end, not framed in terms of privacy and intimacy, but in terms of the masses, describing that within a year ‘correspondence was brought in big mail bags [and] the sight-seeing busses stopped in front of my old little frame building’.²

Just as the public were allowed ‘in’ (for a fee), modernist artists were at the same time regularly getting ‘out’ into public. Alfred Kreymborg, for instance, remembers in his autobiography Troubadour (1925) taking Marianne Moore to a baseball game, hoping for once to catch her out of her intellectual, highbrow dedication to poetry. ‘This descent into the world of the low-brow started beautifully,’ Kreymborg narrates: ‘The “L” was jammed with fans and we had to stand all the way uptown and hang on to the straps. Marianne was totally oblivious to the discomfiture anyone else would have felt and, in answer to a question of mine, paraded whole battalions of perfectly marshalled ideas in long columns of balanced periods which no lurching on the part of the train or pushing on the part of the crowd disturbed.’ Moore sits in her seat at the game and continues to hold forth on the ‘technical
achievements of Mr. Pound and Mr. Aldington without missing a turn in the rhythm of her speech’, when Kreymborg stops her to observe the first pitch. Hoping to finally reveal her lack of knowledge of or engagement with the public and its pastime, he initiates his attack:

‘Do you happen to know the gentleman who threw that strike?’

‘I’ve never seen him before,’ she admitted, ‘but I take it it must be Mr. Mathewson.’

I could only gasp. ‘Why?’

‘I’ve read his instructive book on the art of pitching – ’

‘Strike two!’ interrupted Bob Emslie.

‘And it’s a pleasure,’ she continued imperturbably, ‘to note how unerringly his
execution supports his theories – ’  

Kreymborg is surprised by Moore’s lowbrow credentials, as she passes his test without betraying her intellect or her highbrow manners. But Kreymborg’s main intention, it seems, is to get the poet away from her desk and amongst the public – jostled by the crowd on the train and witnessing the mass spectacle of a baseball game. Moore takes it in her stride, with a fluent segue from the theory and practice of poetry into the theory and practice of baseball pitching. Nearly fifty years later she would be asked to throw out the first pitch at Yankee Stadium, surrounded by an eager and respectful public, thereby delivering the perfect illustration for this special issue of Modernist Cultures.

‘The public’ proved a source of much anxiety for early twentieth-century politics and print culture and this anxiety has formed the subject of good work investigating modernism and its audiences, including volumes on markets, on celebrity, on media, journalism and propaganda, and on literary modernism’s vexed relationship with its readers. These works have begun to problematise the idea of an uncritical homogenised public that is
at once passive in outlook yet active in shaping or diluting culture. But despite the new focus of scholarly attention on modernism and mass culture in the last twenty-five years, the idea of modernism’s public remains remarkably ambiguous. It is not only a problem for modernism, of course, as the very idea of a public is largely imagined, rather than defined. Guido Bruno may attract scholarly attention for facilitating the public invasion of the Greenwich Village artists’ enclave, but it does not mean the tourists individually come into focus. Nor does the mass of baseball fans behind Marianne Moore come into focus, as she appears the centre of attention, an icon of highbrow culture taking part in the popular sport. The public cannot become individualised without ceasing to be the public, despite the distinctive characteristics that might differentiate one public from another. And just as Bruno’s tourists and Moore’s baseball fans do not constitute the same public, they might even belong to different types of public. Michael Warner, for instance, has defined the term ‘public’ in three ways: first as ‘social totality’, as in a nation or the membership of a community, and secondly as a ‘concrete audience’ who share a space or attend the same event. But it is the third definition that Warner argues needs further exploration and helps to reveal why modernism’s audience has so far been seen primarily through the modernist artists themselves or the institutions and media that put them before the public. He argues,

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed."}

The question is just how far modernism’s public even exists outside the projection of an audience presumed by individual works of art and the contexts that surround their production
and distribution. Modernism encounters many different publics, and many of them exist purely in the discourse by which they are addressed.

Since the publication of Thomas Strychacz’s *Modernism, Mass Culture and Professionalism* (1993), a large number of critical works have sought to review modernism’s relationship to mass culture. Much of the first wave of scholarly literature in this area focused on modernist tactical engagements with an encroaching mass market through professionalism, through patronage and limited editions, and through borrowing or subverting new marketing and publishing approaches. Lawrence Rainey, borrowing Habermasian terms of ‘public culture’, paints a picture of a modernism in ‘tactical retreat into a divided world [...] a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counter-space securing a momentary respite from a public realm’. But this idea of a ‘counter-public’, a term used by Mark Morrisson to describe the response of the so-called ‘little magazines’ to ‘the crisis of publicity’, continues to position modernism outside, often in opposition to, though cautiously making forays within, the wider definitions of popular culture, markets or the ‘masses’. Modernism, in this narrative, finds or makes its own unique audience rather than producing work for ‘the public’ – where the latter refers to the overwhelming entirety and the former refers to the cultivated, the exclusive, the elect. This narrative, however, does not always cover the individual approaches of the modernists in this special issue, who are rarely in retreat, but often invite the public in, or construct a discourse stretching beyond the professional, the limited or exclusive, or the informed audience, to include and cultivate a more broadly-defined public. Much work of the last decade has begun to further revise the already revisionist approach to modernism’s relationship to mass culture, revealing not only the cultivation of counterpublics and selective markets by modernists engaged in publicity, but the mediation and reception of a public modernism across a range of popular-cultural institutions or mass-market systems of value, including celebrity, journalism, high-
distribution publishing, cinema, fashion and popular music. Clearly, at times, modernism was in retreat, and offered tactical engagements with professional institutions and counterpublics. At other times, modernism sought out a public amongst the masses, engaging their wider audiences with the intention of partnering, cultivating, and even adapting to their cultural tastes and discourse. As Warner goes on to say:

[W]hen a form of discourse is not addressing an institutional or subcultural audience, such as members of a profession, its audience can understand itself not just as a public but as the public. In such cases, different senses of audience and circulation are in play at once.

This is the problem in understanding modernism’s complex relationship to ‘the public’ – that ‘the public’ itself is either historically- or regionally-contingent, bound by a specific event or locale, or entirely defined by the discourse that addresses it. And if it is the last of these – which seems far the most fruitful of the options in treating modernist studies – how does one measure, quantify or qualify it? In some cases outlined in this special issue, the public never materialises and can only be found in modernist ambition or hope. In others, modernism’s imagined, prescribed counter-public surprises modernist authors by refiguring itself into the public, as mass-market fashions catch up to the discourse of the artists and a sometimes uneasy partnership is struck in the joint-cultivation of modern tastes, techniques, or aesthetics. While modernist discourse imagines its publics, we find just as often that public discourse imagines its modernism.

Modernism’s Publics and the New Modernist Studies
As the new modernist studies continues to explore and re-examine the relationship between modernism and mass culture, there emerge new opportunities for re-evaluating what we mean by modernism’s public. The essays in this issue all focus on the discursive spaces where modernism encounters its public or where a public encounters or constructs its version of modernism. But these relationships need not always be viewed from either one of two perspectives – how modernism treated the public or how the public responded to modernism – since on occasion modernism and the public found themselves inextricably entwined.

Patrick Collier identifies instances in Rose Macaulay’s 1925 essay ‘What the Public Wants’ where ‘rather than merely observing the public, she joins it. The public in her essay […] is we to Macaulay.’ 10 Far from modernism always identifying itself in opposition to the masses, then, we find certain modernists willing to open up definitions of the public to identify with it. According to Collier, the early twentieth century saw a ‘gradual and complex change in what “the public” denoted, from a narrow, bourgeois audience to something much closer to universality—an audience made up of countless interests and levels of ability, unified only by the common denominator of literacy’; an audience that ‘promised enormous profits and influence to anyone who could reach it, but was harder to reach, harder even to imagine’. 11

Modernist studies is now witnessing a similarly complex and challenging shift in conceptions of modernism’s public, or rather, its heterogeneous publics, as the field gradually untangles the multifarious audiences who were addressed by or consumed modernism. As Macaulay observes, ‘Can we reduce our many million minds, with their many million longings, to any sort of common appetite?’ 12

Just as Macaulay and her contemporaries recognised that ‘[a] nuanced sense of diverse publications and multiple, competing and overlapping publics does not provide an adequately stable point against which to define oneself’, modernist scholars are facing the realisation that the existence of multiple and ambiguous publics for modernism troubles not
only the antagonism of high versus low that once provided modernism with its definition, but troubles the very structure of the binary itself.\textsuperscript{13} The need for ‘a stable point’ against which to define the field of modernist studies, even as that field dramatically expands its areas of interest, causes much wrangling with terms – both in relation to the modernist period and in scholarship focused on the surrounding decades. Kirstin Bluemel laments that ‘the apparent colonisation of virtually all areas of study of twentieth-century literary cultural activity by the “New Modernist Studies” has ensured that whatever is not modernism will function as modernism’s other’ in \textit{Intermodernism} (2009), a collection of essays that proposes a new critical category for reclaiming neglected mid-twentieth-century writing that sits ‘between modernism and its many structuring oppositions’, including ‘elite and common, experimental and popular’.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, the field’s sustained assault on the myth of modernism’s isolation from mass markets and popular cultural forms has been so successful that, as Matthew Levay recently observed, the “great divide” that Andreas Huyssen posited between high modernism and mass culture has by now been traversed so many times as to seem like something of a critical straw man, invoked only to be dismissed’.\textsuperscript{15} On the one hand, we have an expansionist field that threatens to define all twentieth-century literary culture either in relation or in opposition to itself. On the other, we have a revisionist field that resists such oppositions, but, by doing so, as Levay indicates when he identifies ‘a high/low binary that has already lost much of its critical influence’, can lead to an investigative dead end for scholars looking to conceptualise differences between artists, works, and their consumers.\textsuperscript{16} These two interlinking movements in contemporary modernist studies together pose problems for critics attempting to analyse the diversity of modernism’s publics, or the diversity of the various public modernisms.

The rise of middlebrow studies has provided a new term, or rather, an old term reimagined, with which to recognise and negotiate the autonomous position occupied by non-
elite publics that defy the high/low binary. Central to the field’s project has been the repositioning of the ‘betwixt and between’ status that Virginia Woolf famously disparaged in the middlebrow as a positive identity and cultural position. Faye Hammill helpfully defines the middlebrow as ‘a productive place from which to reflect on the commerce between high and popular culture, a place of intellectual curiosity and cultural aspiration combined with a healthy scepticism about pretension’. The term can describe writers, readers, texts, or markets, and there remains much debate, as Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch observe in the introduction to their 2011 special issue of Modernist Cultures, ‘regarding the conceptualisation of the middlebrow as a form of reading practice, a useful tool for analysing audiences, a variable aesthetic mode or, perhaps, any combination of these three possibilities.’ Several articles in this issue consider how the cultural aspirations of non-elite publics produced new audiences for modernism. Others demonstrate how modernists addressed or attempted to cultivate such aspirations to generate wider markets for their work. The failure of some modernists to grasp that non-elite publics had their own identities and agendas constructed by alternative cultural discourses and were not simply waiting to be hailed and educated by them is valuably revealed by essays in this issue, too. Yet, few of the publics discussed here are identified as middlebrow. Middlebrow studies has pioneered and continues to supply a range of useful critical strategies for approaching and interpreting the consumption of modernism by a particular public that aspires to cultural sophistication while shunning pretension and actively resists alignment with either high or low culture, but the concept loses its usefulness if applied indiscriminately to group all cultural works and their audiences that are neither highbrow nor lowbrow. Indeed, one of the hazards associated with this term – like ‘the public’ or ‘the masses’ – is its potential to become yet another stable point against which to define modernism if used misleadingly to suggest that disparate publications, markets, and audiences constitute a homogenous identity.
‘Reflexive Circulation’: Modernism in Public and the Public’s Modernism

Rather than pursuing the fixed terms of definition, the essays in this issue of *Modernist Cultures* attempt to bring modernism’s diverse publics into focus by exploring the reflexive relationship between modernist artists and audiences and between modernism and mass culture. ‘No single text can create a public’, Warner posits: ‘A public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse.’ There remains a critical tendency, identified by Justus Nieland in *Feeling Modern* (2008), for modernist scholars to imagine ‘modernist publicness’ only as ‘a function of its participation—through little magazines, manifestos, and in its tireless campaigns of self-promotion and deft use of mass media—in a range of recognizable public and semipublic institutions’. But Warner’s observations remind us that both publics and the state of publicness have a social character and are the result of repeated interaction and dialogue, rather than a singular ‘speech event involving a speaker and addressee’. The construction of the public face of modernism cannot be defined solely in terms of modernists addressing their audiences, nor in how a specific audience responded, but only through continued and extended dialogue within a number of discursive spaces. This ‘reflexive circulation’ where artists meet their publics is not built along a relatively stable ‘axis of utterance and response but [occurs across] potentially infinite axes of citation and characterization’, where modernism is shaped in collaboration with its publics. So while modernist self-promotion or popularity remain important threads within the articles collected here, this issue seeks to conceive of and investigate modernism’s ‘publicness’ as the product of a discursive space in which modernism was not the only voice. As Leick has argued, ‘examining the ways popular audiences understood modernism rather than the ways modernists understood popular culture reveals that there was an increasingly intimate exchange between literary modernism and mainstream culture in this period’. The essays in
this issue reveal just how far both sides of this ‘intimate exchange’ need investigation to understand modernism’s emergence through public discourse. Its essays trace how modernists sought and found a public in a range of commercial and cultural spaces and how these various publics responded, reshaped, or took ownership of modernism.

Sophie Oliver opens this issue with a case study that perfectly demonstrates the dialogue between modernism and mass culture. Her article explores the reciprocal relationship between Jean Rhys and the mass media that made her fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s. Her article exposes how both Rhys’s interwar fiction and the postwar revival in her reputation were informed by fashion’s cyclical temporality. The popularity of Rhys in the second half of the twentieth century, Oliver demonstrates, was propelled by the interests and anxieties of a postwar public that approached her writings of the interwar period in a way that made sense of their own. Her rediscovery was thus the product of dialogue between modernism and mass culture, between interwar and postwar concerns. Rhys’s ongoing interest in fashion, reflected in her stories of the 1920s, anticipated fashion’s interest in Rhys when high-circulation publications asked her to pose for fashion photo shoots in the 1960s and 1970s. Oliver’s article argues compellingly ‘that mass culture set the terms for Rhys’s work and its reception’.

Rod Rosenquist is also interested in the reciprocal exchange between modernism and mass culture. His article uncovers a fascinating correlation between Gertrude Stein’s experimental prose and the advertising techniques of modern consumer culture by tracing the parallel yet divergent careers of Stein and the advertising executive Helen Woodward. Stein’s interest in and parody of the wordplay and object-orientated discourse of advertising slogans, Rosenquist demonstrates, was matched by the esteem for and appropriation of Stein’s experimental subject-orientated prose by Woodward and other writers of advertising copy. His article draws out a number of correspondences in the careers of these two writers, not
least their shared desire to secure signed publication and their ideal reading public in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Yet Rosenquist also showcases pertinent distinctions in the interactions between Stein and Woodward and their respective publics: while Stein was widely known but largely unread in the 1910s and 1920s, Woodward’s adverts circulated amid a huge audience while she remained unknown.

Faye Hammill’s article turns to the social spaces occupied by modernists in public. Her essay reveals the improbable friendship between Rebecca West and Noël Coward and their circulation within a diverse social network drawing together stars of stage and screen, high society figures, as well as experimental writers and artists. Hammill traces the performative aspects of this elite cultural ‘scene’, which met and was staged at the parties of leading hostesses, on the decks of transatlantic liners, and in written reports of such exclusive gatherings in magazines and memoirs of the period. Like the public whose interest it attracted, the self-mythologising modernist scene was moulded and cast by the discourse that constructed it. Hammill’s article provides a valuable counterpoint to the familiar narrative of modernist alienation, while conversely proposing the party as a perfect model for modernism conversely because, despite the increasing visibility of modernist celebrities in print and in public, its social world and intellectual networks continued to be figured as a closed coterie.

Alice Wood also explores the exclusivity attached to modernism in spite of its growing accessibility in the interwar period. Her article focuses on mutually-beneficial exchanges between modernists and *Harper’s Bazaar* (UK) with attention to that elite fashion magazine’s active participation in shaping modernism’s profile. When publishing modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, Wood demonstrates, *Harper’s Bazaar* emphasised and exploited modernism’s perceived high cultural value in order to support its construction of a culturally sophisticated readership. Meanwhile, modernists used the magazine to extend their audience, fuel their celebrity, and affirm their place at the centre of
modernist art. At times speaking at cross purposes to modernism, as Wood’s analysis of modernist contributions within the context of the magazine shows, Harper’s Bazaar (UK) entered into dialogue with modernist artists and works to cultivate a sophisticated public in which modernism was fashioned and consumed as a high-end cultural product.

Hana Leaper’s essay, in contrast, considers an example where modern artists aimed to cultivate demand for modernism as a popular and affordable commodity. Leaper documents the efforts of Claude Flight and the Grosvenor School to create a mainstream audience for their linocuts, through which Flight aspired to offer art to the masses at ‘a price which is equivalent to that paid by the average man for his daily beer or weekly cinema ticket.’ Her intriguing analysis demonstrates how the visual rhetoric of images by Flight and the Grosvenor School attempted to hail the masses by positioning the artist within the crowd alongside the public, rather than observing it externally. Despite this identification with the public, Grosvenor School linocuts were exhibited and sold through high-cultural galleries, saw quickly inflating prices, and failed to attract the working-class audience they targeted. Leaper considers the movement’s relatively short duration in relation to Flight’s tendency to project his own ideologies onto a public whose taste he hoped to influence, and his ill-conceived notion of the public as a passive, amorphous mass waiting to be educated rather than a space in which to enter into dialogue.

Daniel Moore also surveys modernist efforts to engage a mainstream public and cultivate their tastes. His article traces the utopian desire of British modernist artists and architects to reinvent the public through the design and decoration of the home. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of habitus, Moore explores domestic modernism’s conception of the home as a private living space through which modernist designers sought to effect public social change. These private domestic spaces were also sites marked by commercial exchange, and Moore’s article traces the new exhibition and advertising
strategies, as well as the patrons and quasi-state sponsored groups that supported British domestic modernism. Nevertheless, Moore demonstrates that though modernist designers aspired to social change, the public they addressed remained wary. Bemused or negative responses in national and local newspapers to the Isokon building in Hampstead, a modernist experiment in communal living, reveal the extent to which modernist designers struggled to engage the public in a dialogic construct of modern living spaces, a struggle that ultimately delayed modernism’s influence on mainstream British design.

Andrew Thacker draws this issue to a close with investigation of a neglected institution of modernism that fostered economic, intellectual, and social interactions between modernist writers and their readers: the bookshop. His article considers this transitional space - semi-public, semi-private - as both a commercial outlet for modernism and a cultural inlet for the public, a place in which the public can escape the street and find intellectual commerce. Bookshops emerge as social spaces, in which market forces are both at play and kept at bay by the desire to create a counter-public site of cultural as well as economic exchange. The gatherings in bookshops, the promotion and publicity of aesthetic objects, even the production of a humble book catalogue increasingly take on the cultural values of the modernist project, offering another ‘public face’ of modernism not yet fully explored. Thacker convincingly demonstrates that booksellers, as mediators between artists and their consumers, sought to create the kind of ‘social space’ described by Michael Warner where discussion of modernism begins to take on the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ – as in a Gotham Book Mart catalogue, ‘We Moderns’ – drawing together producers, vendors, and consumers of modernism into the shared discourse of being ‘modern’.

While this issue refuses to offer a unified vision of how modernism presented, promoted, or publicised itself and resists the urge to offer a well-defined audience or new labels for modernism’s public, the essays within it all share an interest in uncovering the
complex relationships between artists, mediators and their various publics as well as the
discursive, social, or physical spaces in which they interacted. ‘Modernism in Public’ relates
not only to how modernists encountered the public sphere or how they approached their
audiences, but to how the public engaged, assimilated, consumed, or ignored modernist
discourse. In many ways, we argue, the shape of modernism as a coherent movement and an
aesthetic of significant influence bears the imprint of the various media and shape of the
public spaces through which it was carried beyond the devoted reader to a wider audience. In
fact, the public face of modernism should be understood not only as the face prepared by
modernists to meet their public, but as the face offered to modernism by the mainstream
media, public institutions and the mass audience itself. These seven articles pursue this
version of modernism across a range of spaces in which modernism found a public: within
the fashion pages of the Sunday supplements; across the advertising pages of high-circulation
periodicals; into the glossy, smart magazines; on board the transatlantic ocean liner or on
display in the smart-set parties; in the cheap, mass-reproducible linocut; within the urban
landscape or the ordinary home; and into the public-private space of the bookshop. Many
connections can be drawn – the physical spaces, the cultivation of taste, the appropriation of
modernist discourse by mainstream media – but the one constant in these articles is an equal
interest in the production and consumption of modernist ideas and aesthetics as they circulate
between modernists and their publics. In surveying celebrity culture, fashion, mainstream
magazines and advertising amongst other cultural activities and spaces, the proposed articles
all seek to reveal how modernism both sought to develop a public face in the twentieth
century and encountered a public increasingly active in shaping its profile.

Notes
3 Alfred Kreymborg, Troubadour (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), pp. 244-5.
6 Rainey, p. 5.
9 Warner, p. 66.
10 Collier, p. 138.
11 Collier, p. 20.
12 Quoted by Collier, p. 137.
13 Collier, p. 20.
16 Levay, p. 5.
18 Faye Hammill, Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 52.
20 Warner, p. 90.
22 Warner, p. 90.
23 Warner, p. 91.