

# Inventing Abstraction, Reinventing Our Selves

Date : February 23, 2013

Jonathan Patkowski, PhD Student in Art History, CUNY Graduate Center  
 and Nicole Reiner, Independent Researcher, MA Museum Studies, NYU

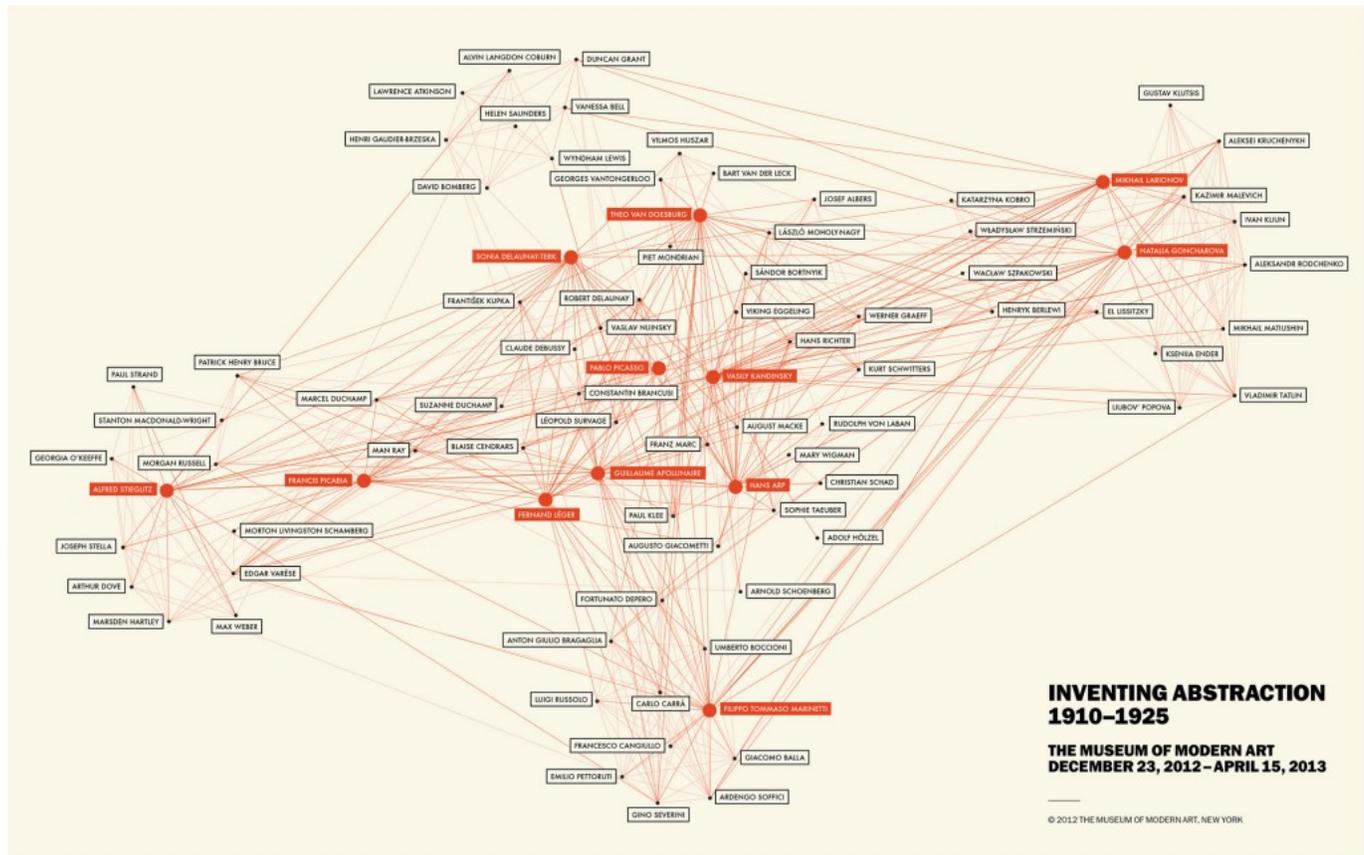


Figure 1. The Artist Network Diagram in *Inventing Abstraction: 1910-1925*, an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, December 23, 2012–April 15, 2013, organized by Leah Dickerman with Masha Chlenova. Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

The recently-opened centennial celebration of abstract art, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925* at the Museum of Modern Art, has been lauded for offering a broadly inclusive and interdisciplinary perspective on hallowed art historical terrain.<sup>[1]</sup> Alongside modernist titans like Malevich and Mondrian, the exhibition spotlights comparatively unfamiliar figures like Suzanne Duchamp, and Polish Constructivist Waclaw Szpakowski. Curator Leah Dickerman further stresses the transmedial reach of abstraction beyond the traditional domains of painting and sculpture, by foregrounding abstract photography, music, dance, and poetry, paralleling the institution’s own disciplinary re-orientation beyond painting and sculpture. Thus, notably, the exhibition features an immersive sound chamber (“Reinventing Music”) featuring six short pieces by Igor Stravinsky,

Edgard Varèse, and other anti-tonal, turn-of-the-century composers, the sonic counterpart, we gather, to visual abstraction.

But even more remarkable than the diverse range of art on display is the oversized diagram greeting visitors at the exhibition entrance, which recasts modernism itself (figure 1). What was institutionalized as a linear progression of stylistic innovation from one avant-garde movement to the next by earlier generations of MoMA curators is here presented as the outcome of the free exchange of ideas across a social network of creative individuals. Adopting the network mindset of today's neoliberal enterprise culture, the Artists Network Diagram in *Inventing Abstraction* replaces the figure of the solitary genius with the well-connected entrepreneur, and historical narrative with social network. The avant-garde becomes, in effect, linked-in.

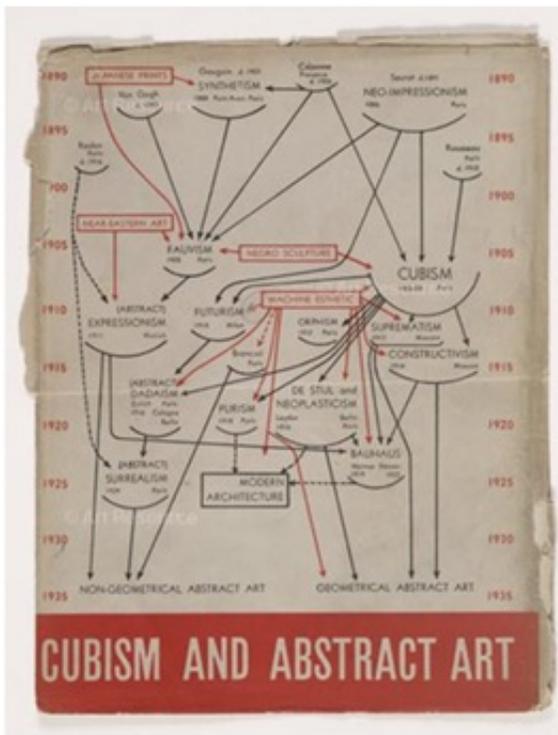


Figure 2. The catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, March 2-April 19, 1936, organized by Alfred H. Barr Jr. Courtesy of Art Resource

Designed by MoMA's curatorial and design teams in collaboration with members of Columbia Business School, the Artist Network Diagram harkens back to MoMA founding-director Alfred H. Barr's seminal 1936 flowchart depicting the origins and evolution of abstract art, and adopts its same font and color-scheme. The original chart appeared on the cover of the catalogue for Barr's first thematic exhibition, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and has been widely reproduced ever since (figure 2). Significantly, Barr's chart harnessed the positivist language of the natural sciences in order to demonstrate how abstraction was the preordained conclusion of artistic developments since the late nineteenth century. One evolutionary trajectory, for instance, charts a continuous

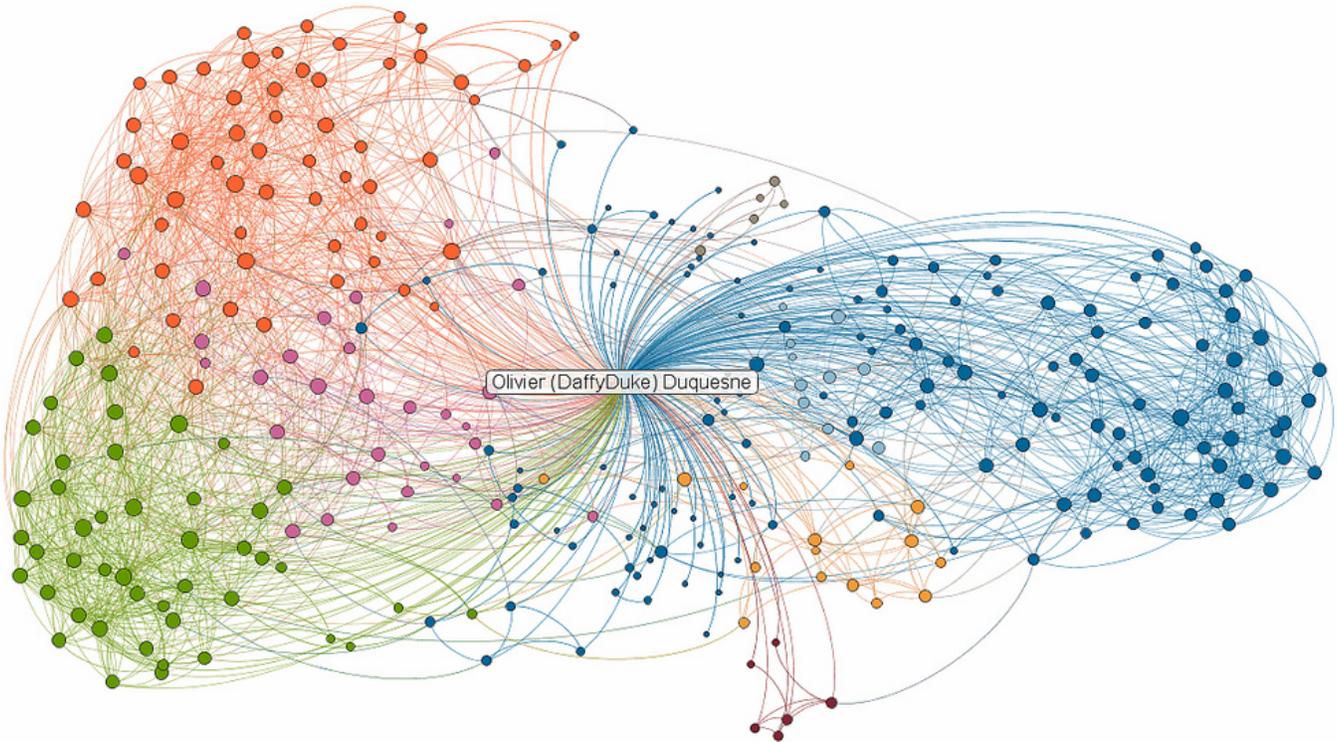
development from Japanese prints to Synthetism, on to Fauvism and culminating in Surrealism, the immediate precursor, we learn, to Non-Geometrical Abstract Art.

Yet, in spite of the Artist Network Diagram's historical patina, this new map follows an entirely distinct logic; rather than charting an evolutionary history of stylistic innovation through a succession of isms, the Network Diagram visualizes relationships between individual artists through a spatial network of vectors laid out in broadly geographical terms. To the right, for instance, we find the names of Eastern European avant-gardists like Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky. To the left, we find New York-based artists like Francis Picabia and Alfred Stieglitz. On the top and bottom, we find clusters of artists who primarily worked in Britain and Italy, respectively. And predictably, at the literal and symbolic center we find those artists and intellectuals—from Picasso to Apollinaire—who made their names in France and Germany, long acknowledged as the epicenter of modernist innovation. Those artists with more than twenty-four connections are highlighted in red, drawing visual attention to the most 'connected' artists.

Those with fewer connections are listed in black, resulting in a diagram that closely resembles the social network visualizations that circulate widely on the internet and which seek to represent the webs of members of social networking organizations like LinkedIn and Facebook.<sup>[2]</sup>

**LinkedIn Maps** Olivier (DaffyDuke) Duquesne's Professional Network  
as of January 25, 2011

---



©2010 LinkedIn - Get your network map at [inmaps.linkedinlabs.com](http://inmaps.linkedinlabs.com)

Figure 3. LinkedIn professional network map. CC Image © 2011 [Source](#)

Rendered thusly, the Artist Network Diagram provides a compass of influence that is calculated solely in terms of the number and quality of interpersonal relationships, or connections, a given artist had cultivated, and suggests that abstraction resulted from individual enterprise rather than from broader historical forces or cultural encounters. It also, and simultaneously, recasts cultural exchange and the figure of the artist according to the logics of neoliberalism, by picturing art history less as an evolution of avant-garde styles and more as the result of enterprising individuals, and by attaching cultural significance to social connection as much as stylistic innovation. This retelling suggests that the modernist artist achieved success not due to the amorphous forces impelling advanced art in modern times, but through his own agency, by establishing connections and capitalizing upon the insights, advice and exchange with peers. Call it the artist as cultural entrepreneur.

The network logic of the Artist Network Map is reinforced within the exhibition through a number of installation strategies and curatorial choices. For example, in stark contrast to the discrete chambers and isolated artworks found in the permanent collection galleries downstairs, *Inventing Abstraction* is mostly comprised of passable, inter-connected spaces, in which works are hung in a dense and occasionally cacophonous manner, evoking both the expansive reach and dense webs of the network diagram. In a room dedicated to Italian abstract art, for instance, no less than twelve pictures occupy a single twenty-five foot wall, and speak across the room to a series of eighteen other works hung *enface*.

The theme of network thinking and exchange is advanced further through object descriptions. While sculptor Henri Gaudier-Beska's primitivistic portrait in wood of poet Ezra Pound (1914) might be a particularly fitting opportunity to note the influence of African art and artifacts on abstraction, the label copy interprets the work as a window onto the personal friendships and interdisciplinary exchanges that marked the period.

The comparison of avant-garde artists to cultural entrepreneurs is made explicit on the exhibition website, in a video interview with Columbia Business School Professor Paul Ingram, who helped to create the Artist Network Diagram. Outlining the characteristics of a successful cultural networker, Ingram states that people who “do” creative networks best “embrace diversity,” are “broad in their interests,” and “have a capacity for social engagement with very different types of individuals.” These capacities, Ingram believes, are so decisive for personal success that they often distinguish between artists who “reach greatness” and those who do not. Lest we mistake him for advocating collectivized cultural practice, however, Ingram cautions that, while social-networking can provide profound sources of creativity and innovation through the free flow of ideas and creative combinations, the successful actualization of ideas requires working in tighter circles, and oftentimes alone. In other words, crowd-sourced knowledge is best exploited in private hands.

While Ingram had in mind the early twentieth century, citing Bauhaus artists as examples of successful social networkers, his advice has as much relevance to our social and economic

present, and resonates perfectly with post-1990 neoliberal calls for personal responsibility and self-empowerment within a de-regulated social and economic field. British Sociologist and social theorist Nikolas Rose (1996), for one, has described how the government and care of individuals has become privatized and dispersed in the wake of the partial dismantlement of the Western welfare states of yore.<sup>[3]</sup> Techniques of management and sociality that once flowed predominantly through institutions like the family, the workplace, and the nation state are increasingly dispersed across sprawling networks of privatized and individuated entities (America's dysfunctional privatized healthcare system, social media sites such as Facebook, etc.). In turn, people are encouraged, by welfare-to-work government programs as much as by competitive reality TV shows, to fend for themselves within these dispersed networks, by cultivating their capacities for self-motivation, self-promotion, and flexibility.<sup>[4]</sup>

Transferring these values onto the turn-of-the-century avant-garde artist, Ingram, and the map he helped design, suggests that modernist exchanges were compatible with individualist, neoliberal modes of sociality, and that the entrepreneurial imperatives of our contemporary network culture are timelessly valid. Thus, the Artist Network Diagram effectively (and ahistorically) rereads artistic modernity through the precarious socio-economic conditions of our contemporary moment, as a free-flowing field of enterprising agents who attained greatness through incessant exchange and competition. We do not mean to suggest that the exhibition's curators intend for this reading to underpin the show, nor even that they would accept it in principle. But by showcasing the Diagram so prominently, both at the Museum and online, they have provided it ample room to impress its logic upon its viewing publics.



may be used to identify and connect disparate strands of art history, but we are not offered a comprehensive view of that of that history nor any metanarrative. Finally, *East Art Map* includes both individuals and artistic groups, and traces interests and affiliations alongside interpersonal relationships, preserving collective artistic identities and trans-personal relations. In this manner, the map appears less as an open field for personal maximization, and allows for the charting of paths without definite aim, purpose, or method.

In complementary fashion, a much smaller exhibition currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde*, hints at yet another story about the origins of abstraction, which throws light on a conspicuous absence in MoMA's story of invention.<sup>[6]</sup> The Met show traces the reception in New York of African artifacts imported via French art dealers and exhibited and resold to New York collectors. Though Manhattan is the focus, we are also reminded of the influential role that the experience of African ethnographic objects had on a great many of the European avant-gardists widely credited with "Inventing Abstraction." While the appropriation of African material by the avant-garde is well rehearsed—even in 1936 Barr included "Negro Sculpture" on his flowchart—it does not figure in MoMA's Artist Network Diagram. This is because the Diagram's historiography is bent by the gravity of a certain political image of the human being as one who is autonomous, strives for personal fulfillment in earthly life, and interprets his destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, finding meaning in existence by shaping his life through acts of choice.

That MoMA, with its competing commitments to both twentieth-century modernism and its contemporary aftermath, should attempt to (re)present a pivotal modernist episode in terms of newly-ascendant political imagery, is certainly understandable. But with results so complicit with the logic of enterprise culture, curators and researchers may want to contextualize their revisions so as to present them less as self-evident truths, and more as historically-contingent perspectives shaped by pervasive ideologies of the present.

### Notes

---

[1] See for instance, Roberta Smith, "When the Future Became Now," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2012, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/arts/design/inventing-abstraction-1910-1925-at-moma.html>; Thomas Micchelli, "MoMA's Show of Shows: 'Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925'," *Hyperallergic*, December 22, 2012, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/62402/momas-show-of-shows-inventing-abstraction-1910-1925/>; Peter Schjeldahl, "Shape of Things: The Birth of Abstraction," *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2013, accessed January 15, 2013, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2013/01/07/130107craw\\_artworld\\_schjeldahl](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2013/01/07/130107craw_artworld_schjeldahl)

[2] LinkedIn, for example, allows members to make visualizations of their professional networks: <http://inmaps.linkedinlabs.com/>, accessed January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

[3] Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4] Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*, (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

[5] IRWIN, ed., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, (London: Afterall Books, 2006).

[6] *African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* is an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 27, 2012–September 2, 2013, organized by the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.