

FATE IN REVIEW, Foundations in Art: Theory and Education, Volume 28,
2006/2007

Terry Barrett
"Approaches to Postmodern Art-Making"

This article is a straightforward and accessible introduction to major ideas, attitudes, and approaches influencing postmodernist artmaking.¹ The article introduces theory through art examples that can be found in a library and on the Internet. What follows can be used to motivate art-making and for analyzing recent art. The concepts overlap, and many of them are active in single works of art and artifacts of visual culture produced both by individuals and groups. In what follows, postmodernism is sometimes explained by contrasting it to modernism, but these two predominant ways of thinking about art co-exist today and influence one another, and what follows is not an attempt to reduce complex ideas of each to over-simplified either/or understandings.

Escaping the Confines of Museums

An integral part of the art world is the art museum. Robert Smithson made *Spiral Jetty* and other earthworks, in part, to circumvent museums and galleries. He wrote this skeptical view of museums:

"Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called *galleries*. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society."²

Other artists, such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, attempt to reach audiences beyond those that visit art galleries and museums by placing their works in public venues. Kruger has placed her pieces internationally, in different languages, on billboards, the outsides of buses, and on tee shirts, matchbooks, and handbags. Jenny Holzer first displayed her now famous *Truisms* on photocopies that she pasted to walls in the SoHo district of New York City. She continues to display work in public spaces.

Christo and Jean-Claude created *The Gates* in Central Park, New York City, in 2005, a project they began in 1979. Nine hundred financially compensated workers participated in the preparation, display, and removal of the project. As Christo and Jeanne-Claude have done for their previous projects, they maintained their creative independence from museums and galleries by financing the \$21-million project by selling preparatory studies, drawings, collages, and scale models. They donated merchandising rights for *The Gates* to a charitable foundation for the park. They accepted no sponsorship or money from the city.

Collapsing Boundaries Between "High" and "Low"

Postmodern artists seek to collapse boundaries that are important to modernists. Modernist artists generally elevate art to a special, independent, and autonomous sphere

of its own, asserting that true art transcends ordinary life. They believe art is "high art" and above the things experienced in "low culture." For example, modernist theorists such as Clement Greenberg disdain "kitsch," a term derived from the German word meaning "trash." Modernists use "kitsch" to label what they consider cheap, tasteless, and tacky things often associated with middle- and lower-class visual preferences: Elvis paintings on velvet, lava lamps, and knick-knacks of all kinds. Beginning with Pop Art in the late 1950s, some artists began to erase the boundary between high and low art by using popular images in their work—comic book images, Campbell's soup cans, Spam, hamburgers and French fries, gas stations, celebrities, and so forth.

Currently, many artists are drawing upon popular culture as a source for their imagery and artistic ideas. Jeff Koons is known for making "kitschy art," a contradiction in terms for modernists. Koons is often associated with his monumental sculpture *Puppy*, made of live flowers, which has been installed worldwide, including Rockefeller Plaza in New York City. Koons's "Banality" series consists of enlarged reproductions of small popular objects such as statues of saints, cartoon animals, Hummel figurines, busty women, naked children, and a souvenir doll of pop singer Michael Jackson.

Takashi Murakami, a contemporary Japanese artist who splits his time between Tokyo and Brooklyn, combines Japanese *anime* images, *manga*, high culture, Japanese Nihon-ga paintings of the 19th century, and influences like Andy Warhol's Factory and Walt Disney animation. His work references religion, subcultures, and art history. An important "low-art" aspect of Murakami's work is its commercial nature: many of his pieces are sold as mass-produced consumer items.

Rejecting Originality

Modernists value and promote the notion of the artist as genius, which is reflected in the artist's originality of thought and expression. In pre-modern times, artists were anonymous contributors to their communities. In modern times, values shifted and the individual artist became honored as a champion of authentic and free personal expression. Postmodernists question the concept of originality in art, and they are suspect of the possibility of being original. They claim not to hold originality as an aesthetic value.

Rather than attributing the work of art to an individual artist, as modernists do, postmodernists think of artworks as "texts." A work is singular, speaking in one voice, that of the artist, which leads the viewer to look for the artist's (singular) meaning. A text, however, implies that any artwork is not the product of a free and unique individual, but rather a field of citations and correspondences. Postmodernists believe an artwork is a confluence of many voices that speak, blend, and clash, and that culture, more than the individual, influences the image.

Many current artists, including Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Haim Steinbach, Chapman brothers, Damien Hirst, and Nikki Lee, have replaced the notion of originality with the notion that all art is derived from other art and that everything new is influenced by things past and present. As artist Joyce Kozloff observes, "All artists lift from everything that interests them and always have—from earlier art, other work that's around, or sources outside art."³ Such a realization liberates artists from the demand to be original and unique, and in their newfound freedom they can quote and borrow from other sources while adding their own imprints and insights.

Jouissance

Jouissance is a French word meaning pleasure and enjoyment, with sexual overtones. *Jouissance* can be considered a postmodernist equivalent to the modernist concept of aesthetic experience. *Jouissance*, in postmodern usage, refers to a viewer being so lost in a work of art through intense pleasurable involvement that self-awareness and objective distance are lost. Modernist "aesthetic experience," however, requires a *distanced* and *disinterested* view of an artwork. For Immanuel Kant, it is not even caring if the object exists. The two approaches to artworks differ, and the differences hinge on postmodernists' close personal engagement (*jouissance*) and modernists' distanced and disinterested aesthetic appreciation. Postmodernists question the possibility and desirability of disinterested engagement with art and life. Postmodernists' engagements with and through art include political and social engagements.

Working Collaboratively

In pre-modern times, artists often worked collectively. In modern times, individual contributions were honored. In postmodern times, some artists are returning to collaborative working methods. For example, six young Pakistani artists, trained in traditional miniature techniques, are making small works based on exquisite 16th century Indian illustrated books made for the emperor with hand-ground pigments on handmade paper, that depict age-old tales of love, war, religion and political power. The young artists also work in miniature with handmade paints and papers, but they add collaged photographic images, stencils, and rubber stamps. Rather than working in one collective studio, they work individually across the globe, and send their jointly made paintings back and forth to each other between Melbourne, Chicago, Lahore, and New York City. One artist begins an image on a sheet of paper and mails it to someone else who continues working on it before sending it to someone else. The contemporary group of artists has a spiritual purpose in their collective art making: they are responding peacefully and creatively, in contrast to the worldwide rise of political and religious aggressive violence following September 11th, 2001.⁴

Appropriating

Appropriation is a direct and clear challenge to modernist notions of originality. To

appropriate is to possess, borrow, steal, copy, quote, or excerpt images that already exist, made by other artists or available in the public domain and general culture. Precursors to appropriation art of the 1980s and after are informed by Marcel Duchamp's "readymades." Most famously, Duchamp's *Fountain*, a conceptual rather than an aesthetic gesture with a urinal, challenged the prevailing modernist definition of art.

Art critic Hal Foster writes that appropriation art reveals that "underneath each picture there is always another picture." Foster argues that the importance of appropriation is that it entails a shift in position: "the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacle."⁵

The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a work of appropriation made by artist Richard Prince of a cowboy on horseback. The artist took it from an image of a successful advertising campaign for Marlboro cigarettes. Prince selected a portion of the image and enlarged it so that its ben-day dots were apparent, thus deteriorating its original sleekness and exaggerating its mechanical means of production. The Metropolitan refers to Prince's piece as "a copy (the photograph) of a copy (the advertisement) of a myth (the cowboy)."

Simulating

To simulate is to imitate or copy. Simulacra are copies of things that no longer have an original or never had one to begin with. The concept of simulacra, developed especially by Jean Baudrillard, a French theorist of postmodernism, is a prominent theme explored by postmodernists. The 1990 movie "The Matrix" explores people and their simulacra. Neo, one of the film's main characters, has a hollowed out copy of Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* that Neo uses as a secret hiding place. The idea of the simulacrum asserts that we no longer are able to distinguish between the real and the simulated "hyperreal" of television, advertising, video games, role playing games, and all kinds of spectacles in contemporary society. The distinction between the real and the representation collapses and dissolves away, leaving only the simulacra.

Betty Boop, a popular icon, serves as a clear example of a simulacrum. The cartoon figure of Betty Boop is based on a singer, Helen Cane. Cane herself rose to fame by imitating Annette Henshaw, a jazz singer in the 1920s. Betty Boop, a copy, survives both Cane and Henshaw, actual people—she is a copy without an original.⁶

Photography, a medium based on copying, has the property of realistic looking duplication. It especially lends itself to play with simulacra by contemporary artists. Gregory Crewdson, for example, uses conventions, techniques, and technicians of mainstream cinema to produce convincing looking simulacra in still photographs in a documentary

genre. Crewdson hires set designers, cinematographers, and professional actors. His final photographs are often composites of different shots: one central scan used for the overall scene and others for details. The Photoshop postproduction work on the images is elaborate. His photographic fictions are very believable as recorded natural occurrences.

Hybridizing

Hybridity is mixing diverse cultural influences in a single artwork. In postmodern terminology, hybridity refers to "the processes and products of cultural mixing which articulates two or more disparate elements to engender a new and distinct entity."⁷ This meaning was shared by artists and theorists during the 1980s. They wanted to disrupt and make more complex the simplistic binary divisions of complex cultural generalities, such as Western/Non-Western, African/European, black/white, masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and so forth.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings are hybrid. They are not hybrid because of his Haitian-Puerto Rican ethnicity, but because they include the consciously primitive styles of artists such as Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet, graffiti, and 1980s punk and funk musical influences. To say that an artist's work is hybrid because of the artist's mixed ethnicity implies the false notion that mixed-ethnic artists automatically produce mixed-ethnic art. Basquiat chose to construct hybrid works of art based on many different cultural influences.

Masami Teraoka is an artist from Japan who lives in the United States, and her art benefits from her experiences of both Eastern and Western cultures. Her water-color *Vaccine Day Celebration*, for example, draws upon the tradition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) to show a modern couple picnicking on a beach in Hawaii. They have just received a fax that announces Vaccine Celebration Day. They dance, he plays a traditional Eastern musical instrument, and flies a kite that reads "Celebration." Faxes and condoms blow in the sea breeze along with cherry blossoms, which reflect the artist's hope for the development of a vaccine that will be effective in preventing AIDS. The painting is a pastiche of cultures and times, mixing the old with the new, including a contemporary epidemic that affects people around the globe.

Mixing Media

Many modernists uphold the ideal that any specific art medium should be used purely. That is, artists ought to discover and exploit the unique nature of any given materi-

