Special Issue on the Postmodern Age

Focus on architecture, design, and arts related to the concept of postmodernism

ART STYLE
Art & Culture
International
Magazine

Cover photo: Detail of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim
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Art Style | Art & Culture International Magazine is an open access, biannual, and peer–reviewed online magazine that aims to bundle cultural diversity. All values of cultures are shown in their varieties of art. Beyond the importance of the medium, form, and context in which art takes its characteristics, we also consider the significance of socio-cultural and market influence. Thus, there are different forms of visual expression and perception through the media and environment. The images relate to the cultural changes and their time-space significance—the spirit of the time. Hence, it is not only about the image itself and its description but rather its effects on culture, in which reciprocity is involved. For example, a variety of visual narratives—like movies, TV shows, videos, performances, media, digital arts, visual technologies and video game as part of the video's story, communications design, and also, drawing, painting, photography, dance, theater, literature, sculpture, architecture and design—are discussed in their visual significance as well as in synchronization with music in daily interactions. Moreover, this magazine handles images and sounds concerning the meaning in culture due to the influence of ideologies, trends, or functions for informational purposes as forms of communication beyond the significance of art and its issues related to the socio-cultural and political context. However, the significance of art and all kinds of aesthetic experiences represent a transformation for our nature as human beings. In general, questions concerning the meaning of art are frequently linked to the process of perception and imagination. This process can be understood as an aesthetic experience in art, media, and fields such as motion pictures, music, and many other creative works and events that contribute to one's knowledge, opinions, or skills. Accordingly, examining the digital technologies, motion picture, sound recording, broadcasting industries, and its social impact, Art Style Magazine focuses on the myriad meanings of art to become aware of their effects on culture as well as their communication dynamics.

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Dear readers,

Since our last issue in commemoration of the first year of Art Style, Art & Culture International Magazine publications, our editorial team, together with the scientific committee, has continuously been committed to offering every academic reader and interested member of the public content focused on the various ways in which our society and culture are represented and transmitted through the arts and media. The arts include their practices, theories, and history, a complexity that involves a very comprehensive and fundamental knowledge of our cultures. Therefore, we endeavor, with each new edition, to create a better approach to this multicultural and artistic scenario with subjects and themes focused on the arts and culture, through essays and special editions.

Another relevant aspect is that Art Style Magazine offers open-access publications – i.e., they can be read online for free. We also remind you that the printed version is another option. We provide a high-definition file of each issue on our website so that readers can download, order, and pay for their print in the print shop of their choice. However, we know that design must extend beyond the product itself and respond to the environment, saving and reusing energy and recycling materials (in our case, paper), thus respecting the principles of sustainable development. In this sense, our goal is to be more conscious of initiatives focused on products rationalized and optimized for low-energy cost or renewable energy and use renewable and environmentally friendly materials. Therefore, print your copy in an ecologically conscious way!

Besides being an online and open-access magazine, we do not charge any fees for publications. The magazine has the support and collaboration of professors, academics, and authors interested in providing quality content and knowledge. Another aspect of our attention is that in the Social Sciences and Humanities, funding agencies, institutions that employ researchers, and the artists themselves aim to evaluate the quality and impact of intellectual production. To this end, we consider within our purposes the resources to ensure that our publications are prudently evaluated, ensuring that metrics and impact factors are not understood as quality factors. To clarify further, as an example, the impact factor that Thomson Reuters assessed was created as a tool to help librarians in identifying journals for acquisition, not as an instrument to measure the scientific quality of an article. Thus, Art Style Magazine aims to improve how research production quality is evaluated through publications, being a signatory to the main agreements that pursue practices related to research articles published in peer-reviewed journals, which can and should be extended to other additional products, such as datasets, because they are relevant research results. Furthermore, the aim is to evaluate the research on its own merits, and we are also committed to ensuring that our journal will be well indexed, and we are also working toward this. It is only a matter of time, considering that the best indexing takes, on average, two years. Now, we are starting our second year of publications, and this is the sixth edition.

Art Style Magazine is independent and supports the Open Access Movement. Also, it follows the recommended international guidelines of the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities. Finally, it presents the central notions of good conduct and research publishing ethics, based on the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the United States National Science Foundation's policies and procedures, the European Science Foundation's code of conduct, and the FAPESP São Paulo Research Foundation's code of good scientific practice.

Enjoy your free reading as well as our special issue!

Christiane Wagner
Editor-in-Chief

Special Issue on the Postmodern Age

We live in the age of postmodernism. What does that mean? With this call for essays, we asked for proposals for a better understanding. At the same time, we were looking for posts that show how the arts have processed and are still processing the change from the modern to the postmodern self-conception of man, which has been described by philosophy since the 1950s to today. This special issue thus demonstrates how architects, designers and artists have reacted to the new socio-politically relevant concepts of postmodernism with a new kind of flatness, diversity and ambiguity in contrast to the identitarian concepts of modernism. What is striking is that the new designs were hardly understood and the reactions to them were characterized by a certain blurriness and uncertainty, which ultimately culminated in the winged term "anything goes." Yet even today, adherence to this negatively evaluated dictum actually hides the critical aspects of postmodern philosophy and the arts' reactions to it, which recognized the limitation of individuality through socio-political paternalism and found an answer first in the rejection, then in the diversification of the individual. It was not until the 1990s that the critical and ethically relevant aspects that challenged active engagement with social constraints began to gain importance in the arts.

Against the background of the ambivalent history of postmodernism in the visual arts, the uncertainty in dealing with their designs was already evident in the very prominent exhibition on contemporary architecture at the MoMA in New York in 1988, which was organized by Philip Johnson. It could not really explain what was actually meant by "Deconstructivist Architecture," as Simone Kraft makes clear. It is Arianna Fantuzzi who shows the neuralgic point of the transition from modernism to postmodernism by comparing self-portraits of artists from the 1990s. With the variety of possible roles that each person can adopt, the designs of postmodernism are thus characterized by the withdrawal of a unique identity. This phenomenon can also be described as Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen does in his historical overview, stating that after an affirmative opportunistic attitude toward sign systems in the 1980s, the arts only took on critical traits in the 1990s. In other words, as soon as the challenge was taken up to find its own, more critical path against paternalistic social standards, the situation changed. In line with this critical approach, Anna Kristensson argues that designers have a duty to choose an open and fair course toward the users, not to manipulate them in the interest of sales, and customers must face the reality of aesthetics and not be misled by supposedly clear advertising. It is Iris Laner, in her examination of postmodern theory and the work of Jeff Wall, who shows how alternative perspectives on our world are tested – permeable to the viewer, not only through the aesthetic, but also through epistemological and ethical gravity. Finally, I expressed myself in a similar way. The possibility of deconstructing our conventional understanding of reality, as postmodern theory made clear and as the artist Karin Kneffel shows, opens the possibility of freeing us from social pre-determinations. The magazine's editor-in-chief also wrote an essay on the changing world of the arts and Jeff Koons.

To conclude, this special issue on postmodernism clearly shows that in the long run, postmodernism Illustrates a completely new view of the world and our being in it. We can no longer hide behind predetermined standardizations. Thus, with the term "anything goes," postmodernism opens a path of liberation from supposedly individual, but socially normed standards. In a new way, we are all called upon to consider not only our own share in shaping reality, but also that of the stakeholders, and to assume responsibility.

See this special publication and have a good reading!

Martina Sauer
Senior Editor

The Deconstructivist Architecture
at MoMA – a story of success?

Simone Kraft

Abstract

"Some exhibitions are more interesting to read about than to actually see, and the twerpy little show called 'Deconstructivist Architecture' at the Museum of Modern Art is certainly one of them," states the New York Observer in July 1988. But nevertheless: "Rarely has an exhibition about architecture attracted so much attention." When dealing with the "Deconstructivist Architecture" (1988, MoMA New York) exhibition, one encounters a curiously ambiguous situation. On the one hand, the show is one of the pioneering architectural exhibitions of the New York MoMA, being a core reference point in relevant literature. The newly coined term "deconstructivist architecture" has established itself as a terminus technicus in the process. Furthermore, response among the contemporary public, both professional and common, has been enormous. Considering how small and brief the exhibition was, these facts seem to speak of the enormous success of the "Deconstructivist Architecture". Yet, on the other hand, when looking more closely at the content of the enormous public feedback, one discovers reserved reactions, the underlying tone being critical up to outright negative. The seven exhibited architects – Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Frank O. Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi and Coop Himmelblau – are reluctant to make any statements, if at all, about their participation in the exhibition. Furthermore, there is the question of how the presented architectural positions correspond to each other: the exhibition spans a visually challenging selection of architecture ranging from Frank Gehry's "distorted" buildings to Peter Eisenman's geometrically strict modernist designs. All this gives rise to the question: the "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition – a story of success?

Introduction

"Some exhibitions are more interesting to read about than to actually see, and the twerpy little show called 'Deconstructivist Architecture' at the Museum of Modern Art is certainly one of them," states the New York Observer in July 1988, while Newsweek headlines: "From Bauhaus to Fun House." The Nation observes "airily pleasing views of the projects" in the exhibition, while the New York City Tribune dryly comments on the "complete inadequacy of its presentation." Nevertheless: "Rarely has an exhibition about architecture attracted so much attention."[1]

When dealing with the "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition, one encounters a curiously ambiguous situation.[2] On the one hand, the show is one of the pioneering architectural exhibitions of the New York MoMA, being a core reference point in relevant literature. The newly coined term "deconstructivist architecture" has established itself as a *terminus technicus* in the process. Furthermore, response among the contemporary public, both professional and common, has been enormous. The media coverage has extended far beyond the standard international architecture and art journals and also includes lifestyle and fashion magazines as well as nationwide newspapers. Research in the MoMA archives reveals an unusually extensive collection of press clippings for the time; the press budget was even doubled in the course of the preparations. Considering how small and brief the exhibition was – the show ran for hardly two months during the summer of 1988 and covered only three minor spaces –, these facts seem to speak of the enormous success of the "Deconstructivist Architecture".

Yet, on the other hand, when looking more closely at the content of the enormous public feedback, one discovers reserved reactions, the underlying tone being critical up to outright negative. The seven exhibited architects – Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Peter Eisenman, Frank O. Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi and Coop Himmelblau, most of them early on in their career, who benefited from an exhibition at MoMA – are reluctant to make any statements, if at all, about their participation in the exhibition. In retrospect, Bernard Tschumi says: "Then in 1988, with the deconstructivism exhibition at MoMA, totally in spite of ourselves, we became an establishment of sorts."[3] Peter Eisenman even states: "I do not believe such a movement exists. Deconstruction has become a stylistic term, and not an ideological one."[4]

Furthermore, there is the question of how the presented architectural positions correspond to each other. The exhibition spans a visually challenging selection of architecture ranging from Frank Gehry's "distorted" buildings to Peter Eisenman's geometrically strict modernist designs, or as Werner Oechslin put it: "Who would have called the intellectualizing Eisenman with the spontaneously creative Californian Gehry in the same breath a few years ago!"[5] Is the compilation of the selected architects convincingly founded? The "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition – a story of success?

In the following analysis, we will take a look "behind the scenes" of the show and trace the key problems leading to its ambivalent nature. What were the reasons for the enormous public interest? How was the exhibition designed to make the feedback so critical? What conceptual weaknesses were there and what led to them? We will start with a look at the facts of the exhibition itself.[6]
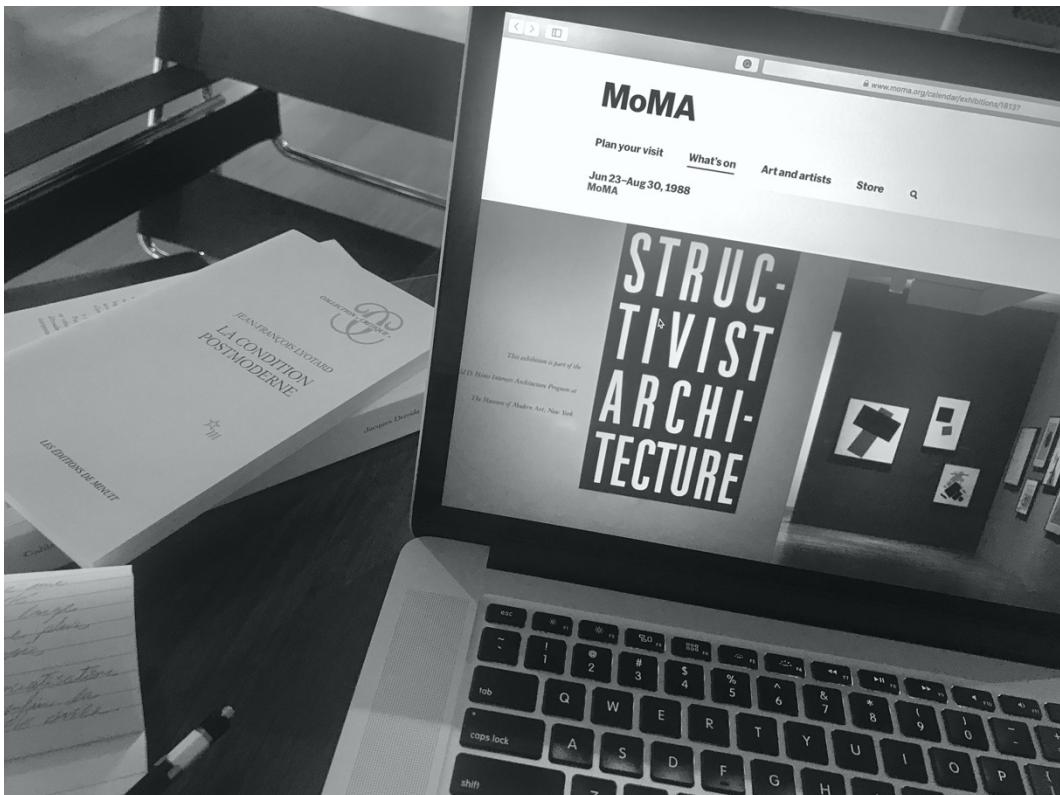

Figure 1. For more info, check out the MoMA's exhibition webpage:
Deconstructivist Architecture, 1998: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1813.
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The "Deconstructivist Architecture"– the exhibition

From June 23 to August 30, 1988, the "Deconstructivist Architecture" show at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) assembled works of seven contemporary architects – Peter Eisenman, Frank O. Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi and Coop Himmelblau[7] – as well as a selection of early 20th century Russian avant-garde art in three small rooms at the museum's Medium International Council Galleries (the gallery was removed during the renovations by Yoshio Taniguchi between 2002 and 2004).[8] The presentation of Russian avant-garde art from the museum's own collection opened the show, putting the contemporary architects into a distinct programmatic context. The compilation in itself was a unique exhibition, yet it presented almost exclusively examples from visual arts, no architectural projects. In this fashion, the models and drawings of the seven contemporary architects were assembled in an "artistic" way as well: the exhibition is rather reminiscent of a sculpture show providing only the most basic information of the exhibited projects (architect, project name, location, year) without naming relevant architectural information (intention, size, material, status of realization etc.). The show is accompanied by a catalog which became the main reference for its curatorial concept.[9]

The archival documents reveal that the project was included in the annual exhibition program at a very late stage and with a very short organizational period of circa twelve months (which reflects the contentual stringency of the exhibition; we will come back to this). Apart from this aspect, the exhibition does not appear particularly striking at this point. What makes it exceptional is the curatorial team. At the invitation of Stuart Wrede, then interim head of MoMA's Architecture and Design department, the show was curated by Philip Johnson[10], the gray eminence of the US architecture scene and closely connected to the MoMA, together with the young New Zealand architect Mark Wigley[11]. It is Philip Johnson's participation that drew major attention to the show. Not only was he one of the most important personalities in the American architecture scene, but he was also closely connected to the MoMA as founder and long-time head of the Architecture and Design department from which he retired in 1954. In 1932, Johnson co-curated the pioneering exhibition "Modern Architecture"[12], one of the first presentations of contemporary architecture in a museum setting, which established the so-called "International Style", gaining Johnson a reputation as a "style maker"[13]. In 1988, Johnson was over 80 years old and it was reasonable to conclude that the "Deconstructivist Architecture" would put a final mark on his curatorial career, more than half a century after the introduction of International Style – an assumption he furthered himself, too.[14] Unsurprisingly, the public attention was high.

Indeed, the exhibition was largely shaped by Johnson in every respect: Not only is it his involvement that drew public attention to the show, but it is also his participation that made the show possible both from an organizatorial and a contentional point of view. Accordingly, as will be demonstrated, the critical spots of the show were basically influenced by Johnson's lead. In the following, we will take a closer look into Johnson's involvement in the genesis of the show, before taking a look at the conceptual weaknesses in the content, which caused the ambiguous feedback. What claims did the show make – and why could it not meet them?

The "Deconstructivist Architecture" – "Johnson's baby"?

A closer look at the creation of the exhibition opens up a complex situation with several aspects that throw a critical light on the way it was handled.[15] A concentrated summary of these circumstances is provided by Michael Sorkin in an article which appeared on December 1, 1987 in the New York weekly newspaper The Village Voice.[16] Sorkin paints a picture of the events that accompany the creation of the exhibition which many participants consider to be correct, yet contemporary reactions remained limited to few brief references from a small group of specialist authors. With Sorkin taking on a very Johnson-critical stance, special care must be taken when assessing these processes from a historical distance. Furthermore, administrative and organizational circumstances are not necessarily related to the substance of a project. In the case of the "Decon Show", however, some of the organizational processes impacted the content of the exhibition – and all of these aspects were strongly influenced by Johnson's participation.

In fact, the show came about only through Johnson's involvement. Through research processes have been discovered that might even appear to be material for a thrilleresque narration: the original idea for the exhibition roots back to Chicago in 1984, where two young architects, Stephen Wierzbowski and Paul Florian, came up with the concept of a show to address the predominant positions in contemporary architecture, yet the realization failed for funding reasons.[17] It took various steps and an intermezzo from Aaron Betsky[18] until the idea found its way to Philip Johnson, who quickly recognized its potential and set its realization at the MoMA into motion – without refering to any great extent to its Chicago origins. A "subplot" in the MoMA – the position of the museum's Architecture and Design department needed to be filled – gives the story a dramatic twist.[19] According to Sorkin, all these developments led, to the project turning into "Philip's baby"[20]: Johnson was introduced as being the patriarchal "mastermind" of the show pulling all the strings. Even when keeping Sorkin's

critical stance in mind, evaluating these events carefully still shows: there's something to it. The number of overlaps between the Chicago and New York concepts cannot be mere coincidence.[21] The process of the creation of the show is difficult to reconstruct, as there are only few documents concerning the planning of the concept of the exhibition in the museum's archive. Contemporary companions who were initially involved, withdrew themselves in the course of the project due to these inconsistencies "behind the scenes".[22] This background is worth mentioning, as the questionable origin of the exhibition concept applies to the content as well: it is neither fully documented as to how the selection of the exhibited architects and their works came about, nor are the theoretical approach – with a curatorial focus on forms only – and the definition of the exhibit's title stringently argued.

Between Russian Constructivism and Deconstruction:
Intention and reality of the conceptual reasoning of the exhibition

The exhibited works are announced as examples of a "radical architecture"[23] that marks the emergence of a "new sensibility"[24] in architecture which is characterized by instable, fragmented forms. In the catalog, curators emphasize that they do not want to present a new style, a new "ism", but show just a section, a snapshot of current developments. As a definition, they (exclusively) claim a formal connection to Russian avant-garde; any reference to Derrida's thinking of *déconstruction*, which is clearly present in the chosen title term, is rigorously excluded.

However, the curators are unable to meet this claim either with a convincing and stringent exhibition or with the conceptual reasoning in the accompanying catalog. Rather the explanations appear contradictory and misleading.[25] For once, there is no convincing reasoning for the claimed reference to Russian constructivism – neither with regard to the historical role models nor with regard to the contemporary positions. Furthermore the choice of title for the exhibition is difficult in more ways than one; we will come back to this question later on. In addition, the chosen term – deconstructivist – poses a linguistic problem, as it implies the "ism", which the curators stress they wished to exclude (and indeed, the exhibition is quickly perceived in a perspective of style only.) In addition, the curators emphasize that the exhibited projects can actually be built and are not just theoretical experiments on the drawing board. This attitude, the rejection of overly intellectualizing "paper architecture", is typical for the time, as Werner Oechslin points out.[26] However, this approach does not manifest itself in the show: the projects are presented in a "sculptural" way, as has already been indicated. Furthermore, this attitude falls short in our context, because most of the selected architects have a distinctive theory-based understanding of their

work. For none of them is an adequate analysis of their work possible without considering both conceptual reflexions and practical implementation. Any assessment which excludes the complex thoughts behind the respective formal solutions does not do justice to the architectural understanding of any of the seven exhibited architects. How does this inconsistent and illogical argumentation come about? A closer examination of the exhibition catalog, as the main source for the conceptual ideas of the curators, sheds light on this question. As an intensive discussion is not possible in this context, I will present an overview of core weak points of the curators' conceptual argumentation.

The Curators' Conceptual Reasoning and its Weak Points

The catalog consists of a preface by Philip Johnson and an essay by Mark Wigley; it is mainly Wigley's longer contribution that explains the approaches of the exhibition organizers and thus provides the theoretical underpinning of the exhibition.[27] Overall, there are sharp considerations, but the stringent arc that connects the different lines of argument is missing, as critics already noted in 1988.[28] The text appears to be inconclusive. It may become apparent that Wigley had to merge different positions into one text, as Catherine Ingraham suspected.[29] In fact, it can be observed how Wigley first had intentions concerning the show which were different to those of Johnson: "This is an ideological show linked by certain theoretical conceptual questions, not certain esthetic questions."[30] These ideas, however, are no longer found in his essay. Johnson, on the other hand, is reported to have always waved off any discussions about the show when they became too theoretical. He stresses how the exhibition was intended to be "about art"[31]. It is Johnson's purely formally aesthetic perspective that forms the conceptual approach of the exhibition.

The way both curators choose a vocabulary with rather negative connotations stands out, when talking about the exhibited positions. Terms such as "impure", "conflict", "disturb", "violated" are used to describe the deconstructivist architecture as opposed to "pure" modernist forms.[32] Subliminally, this creates a rather negative stance towards the presented architecture – all the more so, as no convincing new definition is developed. Furthermore, Wigley's essay works with an inaccurate take on the terms to be defined: while talking about "deconstructive" architects at the beginning of the essay, the second half of the text writes about "deconstructivist" architecture – without further explanation. Both terms are used interchangeably, a clear indication of how complicated the term is and how unclear its conceptual definition is to the curators.

The curators' approach claims to relate contemporary architects to Russian constructivism, yet they are unable to substantiate this claim in a convincing manner. They do not elaborate on how the deconstructivist architects were to draw from the Russian avant-garde. Furthermore, they remain with stating that the architects would use "strategies tested by the avant-garde"[33] and analyze them structurally – yet there follows no explication concerning which strategies these were and how they were applied. The reasoning behind adding a "de" to Constructivism and turning the new architectural position into a "de-constructivist" thinking is not explained.

In fact, none of the seven architects on display refers exclusively and expressively to Russian Constructivism. While some architects, such as Zaha Hadid or Rem Koolhaas, have more obvious influences from the Russian 1920s than others, the interest in their work and their occupation with Russian models is fundamentally different from that described in the catalog. All architects deal with the developments of modernity and do not limit themselves to the Russian tendencies, nor to only formal analyses. However, the catalog does not take the conceptual-theoretical foundations of the seven architects into account. Moreover, the catalog's portrayal of Russian avant-garde itself is inaccurate – here, too, they take on an exclusively formal perspective;[34] this shows how the curators see a historical movement in a certain perspective only, to support their own approach. In total, the conceptual reasoning of the exhibition comes across as imprecise and not well thought out. Basically, all of this largely depends on the chosen title which opens up a complex array of possible meanings, which the curators are unable to answer stringently. Why choose such a loaded term? A look at the time and the philosophical context of philosophy can help to clear things up.

The "Decon Show" – just another fad?

Jacques Derrida's term *déconstruction* has been in use in the United States since the 1970s; actually, Derrida developed an influence there which he would never achieve in his own country.[35] "Deconstruction" had become an intellectual buzzword and been used across disciplines, especially in literary studies, but also in law and art theory.[36] In the late 80s, attempts were made to apply the term to architecture as well; for example, Charles Jencks described Gehry's way of working as "deconstructivist" in 1985, however without Gehry having processed any philosophical influences at all,[37] unlike Peter Eisenman, who, like Bernard Tschumi, corresponded with Derrida publicly.[38] In March 1988, the Tate Gallery London held a one-day symposium entitled "Deconstruction in Art and Architecture", which also included some of the participants of the New York exhibition. Therefore the MoMA show encounters a situation in which there is already a lot of discussion trying to apply the notion of deconstruction to architecture. Furthermore, at the end of the 1980s, postmodernity, as the predominant tendency, in architecture (and not only there) had passed its zenith. The desire for further developments is spreading as is the desire for "something new" to end the postmodern eclecticism. The expectations for a MoMA show featuring this title were high – all the more so with it being curated by Philip Johnson.

Interestingly, the curators explicity refrain from any reference to Derrida's thinking.[39] In response to Patricia C. Phillips's request in an interview, Johnson even states that he has never read Derrida.[40] Also, Wigley has been brought on board – and been announced – as a specialist on deconstruction, a focus he is not able to follow up on in the catalog essay.[41] Obviously it is Johnson's perspective once again to dominate the conceptual approach of the show. This way of applying a widely acquainted notion and re-defining it in a manner that is more adept to the curators' own point of view is disconcerting. It leads to a "flattened" perception of both the conceptual definition and the exhibited architectures. Neither become more precise in meaning, but are simplified and reduced. Corresponding concerns have already been voiced by contemporaries;[42] the developments after the exhibition show how the curators' simplified formal-only concept of de-constructivism has indeed established itself as a predominantly formal term (which does not correspond to the architects' positions). "Deconstructivist" becomes a synonym for formally "slanted, sloping, twisted". A MoMA exhibition would be expected to deal with such a complex subject in greater depth.[43] So why choose such a term? In fact, there is no official explanation for the selection of the title in the archival documents. The assumption arises that tactical considerations regarding the media played a role: using a buzzword like "deconstructivist" would certainly attract a lot of attention. A tactic that worked. Nevertheless, regardless of Johnson's standing, the exhibition would not have had such an impact had not the time "been ripe" for it and the peak of postmodernity passed.

Conclusion

The complex situation surrounding the "Deconstructivist Architecture" makes it difficult to judge the show's "success". The exhibition was successful in terms of perception and scope, the choice of title and the curatorial concept have been widely established as "standard". At the same time, the show was not a success in terms of content and substantive feedback. As stated, there are fundamental weaknesses in the genesis of the exhibition which also influence the conceptual reasonings: the formal perspective does not grasp the positions of the seven architects, the reference to Russian Constructivism is not convincingly argued, the presentation of just these seven architects in a show remains indistinct. Furthermore, the choice of the title is critical, as it is not convincingly founded, the curators cannot clarify the complex contexts. These developments appear to have largely depended on Philip Johnson's involvement, as the "mastermind" behind the show.

Nevertheless, despite all criticism of Johnson, he has demonstrated a keen sense of new trends: he puts a topic into focus which has been "around". The exhibition does present new, different approaches to architecture. What makes the "Decon Show" difficult is not so much the selection of these seven architects in one show, but the way this combination is argued conceptually. As has been shown, the curatorial presentation and the conceptual argumenation is unfavorable, as it neither does justice to the seven architects nor does it establish a stringent new term and concept. Nevertheless, there are characteristics that the seven architects share, yet in a different way to that argued in the catalog – rather in a way the catalog excludes: in reference to Derrida's deconstruction.

All the architects have established a certain way of working with context. This is an observation Wigley makes in his essay, too, stating that the projects were not "anti-contextual":[44] from dealing with the geographical situation of a project, as can be observed with Hadid and Koolhaas, whose designs react intensively to local conditions, to a broad(er) reaction to the peculiarities of the found environment, as pursued especially by Gehry, who consciously applied typical Californian building materials in his early works. It leads to the exploration of the inconceivable context – in a historical as well as in a cultural and social sense, as occurs with Koolhaas, Libeskind, Tschumi and, above all, Eisenman. They analyse these contexts and integrate the results into their own design. This way of working represents a kind of designing that does not invent, but explores ways of dealing with what is already there. It does not set up something "new", but adds uses to what is already there and applies it in another way. This approach has "de-con-structive" features that can be understood in the sense of Derrida's deconstruction: as working with existing content that is called into question and "broken down" – but not destroyed – into pieces, to gain new insights into it.

At this point it is important to note that none of the seven architects has "architecturized" deconstruction, none of them has dealt with this philosophy as the starting point for their own work, and in this, the curators are right in excluding any reference to Derrida. Rather, it is a specific attitude, an approach and a way of dealing with the existing "material" that the architects share – and which bears traits of a de-con-structivist process, but remains independent without being directly influenced by philosophy. The work of the seven architects proves to be still deeply rooted in postmodern thinking: starting out with a profound criticism of the predominant architectural eclecticism, the seven architects develop different takes on architecture while remaining rooted in the thinking structures of the time.[45]

With this in mind, the designation of the seven architects as deconstructivist is actually not inappropriate, even if the term is difficult and involves the risk of misinterpretation. Thus deconstructivist architecture is less a stylistical way of building with distorted forms, but a complex attitude of working with "found materials", as Welsch stressed: "Deconstruction is part of the chromosome set of current thinking."[46] Despite all the contradictions and despite itself, the "Deconstructivist Architecture" show can indeed be considered a success in its very own, controversial way – a "strange" exhibition in the best sense of the word, and maybe that is precisely what made it into a milestone of recent architectural history.

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Notes

[1] Quotes from the following articles: Hilton Kramer, "Twerpy MoMA Architecure Show Another Nihilist Stunt by Johnson". In *The New York Observer*, July 4–11, 1988; Cathleen McGuigan, "From Bauhaus to Fun House". In *Newsweek*, July 11, 1988; Jane Holtz Kay, "Architecture. Deconstructivist Architecture. Architectural Art. The Architecture of Frank Gehry". In *The Nation*, October 17, 1988; Jason Edward Kaufman, "Exhibition of 'Deconstructivist Architecture' Is Conceptually Offensive". In *New York City Tribune*, June 27, 1988; Ralph Bennett, "The House that Deconstruction built (or didn't)". In *Warfield's Magazine*, Baltimore, MD, September 1988.

[2] An intensive examination of the "Deconstructivist Architecture" can be found in my publication Simone Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus in der Architektur? Eine Analyse der Ausstellung 'Deconstructivist Architecture' im New Yorker Museum of Modern Art 1988*, Bielefeld 2015; this essay is based on this book. I will refer to the relevant sections at certain points.

[3] Bernard Tschumi, Enrique Walker, "The Manhattan Transcripts". In Bernard Tschumi, Enrique Walker, *Tschumi on Architecture. Conversations with Enrique Walker*, New York 2006, 40.

[4] David Cohn, Peter Eisenman, "Entrevista / Interview." In Richard C. Levene, Fernando Márquez Cecilia (Ed.), *Peter Eisenman*, Madrid 1989 (= El Croquis 41), 7.

[5] Werner Oechslin, "Kulturgeschichte der Modernen Architektur. Eine Einführung."

In Werner Oechslin, *Moderne entwerfen: Architektur und Kulturgeschichte*, Köln 1999, 15, transl. by the author.

[6] The following analysis will focus on the developments of the exhibition; thus the presented architects and their work will not be discussed in this context.

[7] The following projects were presented in the exhibition: Peter Eisenman: *Bio Center*, 1987, Frankfurt; Frank O. Gehry: *Gehry House*, 1977/78, Santa Monica; *Familian House*, 1978, Santa Monica; Zaha Hadid: *Peak Leisure Club*, 1982/83 Hongkong; Rem Koolhaas: *Boompjes Tower Slab*, Housing Project, 1979–1982, Rotterdam; Daniel Libeskind: *City Edge*, 1987, Berlin; Bernard Tschumi: *Parc de la Villette*, 1982–1998, Paris; Coop Himmelblau: *Roof extension Falkestraße*, 1983–1988, Vienna; *apartment complex Wien 2*, 1982/83, Vienna; *Skyline Hamburg*, 1985, Hamburg.

[8] For a detailed description of the following see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, chapter 2.

[9] Philip Johnson, Mark Wigley, *Dekonstruktivistische Architektur*, Translation from English by Frank Druffner, Stuttgart 1988; original publication: Philip Johnson, Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, New York 1988.

[10] Philip Johnson (1906–2005) co-founded MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design in 1932; the MoMA itself was founded in 1928 and was one of the first museums for contemporary art. Johnson surprisingly ended his work for the MoMA in 1934, but returned in 1945 (see Terence Riley, "Portrait of the Curator as a Young Man". InJohn Elderfield (Ed.), *Philip Johnson and The Museum of Modern Art*, New York 1998 (= Studies in Modern Art, 6), 35). After leaving active employment in 1954, he worked as a trustee and chairman of the trustee committee on architecture and design from 1957 onwards; from 1981 he was Honorary Chairman of the Committee. During his time at the department of Architecture and Design, Johnson curated several pioneering exhibitions.

[11] Mark Wigley (*1956) did his Bachelor of Architecture (1979) and Ph.D. (1987) with a dissertation about Jacques Derrida's philosophy in an architectural discourse at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. In 1986 he came to the United States, where he taught at Princeton University from 1987 to 1999. He has been a professor of architecture at the Graduate School of Architecture, University of Columbia, since 2000; from 2004 to 2014 he was Dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation in New York.

[12] "Modern Architecture. International Exhibition," February 10, 1932 – March 23, 1932, Museum of Modern Art, New York; curated by Alfred Barr with Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock.

[13] Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 58.

[14] Philip Johnson, "36 Creative Artists Discuss Their New Works: Philip Johnson. Architect." In *New York Times*, January 3, 1988.

[15] For a detailed description of the following see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus,* chapter 2.1.1

[16] Michael Sorkin, "Canon Fodder." In *The Village Voice*, December 1, 1987.

[17] The Chicago architects Paul Florian and Stephen Wierzbowski, then extraordinary professors at the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, developed an extensive concept featuring 40 to 50 examples, which they later reduced to a smaller version: "Violated Perfection: The Meaning of the Architectural Fragment", including seven architects: Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, SITE, Krueck and Olsen, Eric Moss, Hiromi Fujii and Zaha Hadid. For both concepts they contacted numerous persons to ask for support (cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 27–31).

[18] Aaron Betsky realizes a book project essentially based on the original concept by Florian and Wierzbowksi, with the support of the Chicago architects. The publication appeared in 1990: "Violated Perfection. Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern," with the addition "concept developed by Paul Florian, Stephen Wierzbowski and Aaron Betsky" (Aaron Betsky, *Violated Perfection. Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern*. Concept developed by Paul Florian, Stephen Wierzbowski and Aaron Betsky, with a violation by Paul Florian and Stephen Wierzbowksi, New York 1990).

[19] According to Sorkin, it is an open secret that the job would not be filled without Johnson's consent (Sorkin, "Cannon Fodder"; Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 29). Thus Stuart Wrede's status, as interim-head of the department and with ambitions to take on the position, most certainly was not an easy one when Johnson approached him (cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 29).

[20] Sorkin, "Cannon Fodder."

[21] A few examples: In house, the show was labeled using the Chicago title

"Violated Perfection" for a while. Some architects were included in both the Chicago and the MoMA concepts (Coop Himmelblau, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid), a total of seven architectural positions were presented in both shows. Furthermore, Wierzbowski and Florian made a connection to Russian Constructivism. The concepts differ in the formal-aesthetic focus of the MoMA show (see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 35–36).

[22] Cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 32.

[23] Press Release MoMA: "Deconstructivist Architecture", June 1988, https://assets.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6559/releases/MOMA_1988_0062_63.pdf (status June 2020).

[24] Wall text of the exhibition, published in Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 341–342.

[25] For a detailed description see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, chapter 2.7.

[26] Werner Oechslin, "Die Tabuisierung des russischen Beitrags zur modernen Architektur." In Werner Oechslin, *Moderne entwerfen. Architektur und Kulturgeschichte*, Köln 1999, 287.

[27] For a detailed description see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, chapter 2.7.

[28] For example Kaufman, "Exhibition"; Catherine Fox,"Laying Architectural Convention on Its Ear". In *The Atlanta Journal*, July 3, 1988; Ellen Posner, "Deconstructive Criticism". In *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 1988; Roger Kimball, "Philip Johnson's revenge." In *Architectural Record*, August 1988; for a more detailed description see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 119.

[29] Catherine Ingraham, "Milking Deconstruction or Cow Was The Show". In *Inland Architect*, Chicago, IL, September/October 1988.

[30] Wigley quoted from Lynn Nesmith, "Deconstructivist Architecture Show To Open at MoMA Late This Month". In *Architecture*, June 1988.

[31] Johnson quoted from Victoria Geibel, "Design and Dissent". In *Elle*, June 1988.

[32] See Johnson/Wigley, *Dekonstruktivistische Architektur*, 7–20.

[33] Johnson/Wigley, *Dekonstruktivistische Architektur*, 16.

[34] The Constructivists were not pursuing an aesthetic approach, but distancing themselves from it. Their work was expressively socially oriented. Even though such an aesthetic take on the Russian avantgarde has been common for a long time in Western art history, nevertheless, in the 1980s numerous publications deduced that Constructivism had been more than an aesthetic art movement (Oechslin, "Tabuisierung", 270, 286; also cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, chapters 2.7.2.1 and 2.7.2.2). It is suprising that the curators still pursued this dated point of view.

[35] Cf. François Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the intellectual Life of the United States*, translated by Jeff Fort with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones, Minneapolis 2008, 2.

[36] For a detailed description see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 40–46.

[37] Cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, chapter 3.

[38] Derrida, in return, expresses his views on architecture, too. In addition, Eisenman and Derrida began working on a joint project, the CHORA L WORKS, in the mid-1980s (*Chora L Works. Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, ed. by Jeffery Kipnis, Thomas Leeser, New York 1997; cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 43.

[39] For a detailed description see Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 46–47.

[40] Patricia C. Phillips, Philip Johnson, "The greatest show un-earthed". In *Stroll*, June 1988.

[41] See Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 38–39.

[42] Cf. Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 46–47, 66–67.

[43] The architects of the "Deconstructivist Architecture" are encountering the same fate that befell the architects of the "Modern Architecture" show around 50 years earlier: their work was reduced to formal aspects and perceived in a stylistic perspective only.

[44] Discussed in detail in Kraft, *Dekonstruktivismus*, 109–111.

[45] For example, Wolfgang Welsch thinks about this in detail ((Wolfgang Welsch, "Das weite Feld der Dekonstruktion". In Gert Kähler (Ed.), *Schräge Architektur und aufrechter Gang. Dekonstruktion: Bauen in einer Welt ohne Sinn?*, Braunschweig, Wiesbaden 1993 (= Bauwelt Fundamente 97), 50–63. In fact, the possibility to transfer a method of thinking like deconstruction, which was developed in linguistic philosophy, to architecture is itself made possible only through postmodern thinking about architectural languages.

[46] Wolfgang Welsch also points out that "motives for deconstruction are not only found among the explicit deconstructivists, but also with other great thinkers of modernity and the present" (Welsch, "Das weite Feld", 51, transl. by the author).

Me, myself and I.
The Self-Portrait in Postmodern Time

Arianna Fantuzzi

Abstract

In 1984, the literary critic and philosopher Frederic Jameson theorized the replacement of the individual subject of the modern era with the fragmented, decentered and multiple ego produced by the postmodern culture, absorbed in a continuous present that erases history and distinguished by a sort of emotional flatness. As postmodern theorists debated contemporary identity, several visual artists produced self-portraits that multiplied, fractured or disguised their image, reflecting on the condition of the ego in contemporary society. Subject to the cultural, aesthetic, social and anthropological transformations, the self-portrait has indeed changed form and symbology over the centuries, infusing the image of the artist with multiple meanings, focusing firstly on a question: how do I want you to see me? In the postmodern context, the answer to this question acquires many forms, as does the representation of the artist's identity. In order to understand the peculiarity of the self-portraits of this period, the essay will focus on several works, including *Spermini* (1997) by Maurizio Cattelan, *The Book of Food* (1985-1993) by Vanessa Beecroft, *Untitled #193* (1988) by Cindy Sherman and the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002) by Matthew Barney. Concerning this, the focus will be on the artistic production of the 1990's because, as far as I can see, it seems to display a relevant maturation of the features that Jameson assigns to the postmodern ego. In the guise of self-projection, duplication and disguise, these and other self-portraits appear as the symbol of a multiple, evanescent and chameleonic ego, aimed at impersonating multiple roles and characters, assuming different self-concepts or a changing identity. In order to analyse these artworks, I will use an interdisciplinary approach combining an art historical and anthropological perspective (Belting, Hall) with postmodern self theories (Jameson, Gergen).

Introduction

At the end of the 20th Century, in line with the profound transformation of the ego described by postmodern theories, the self-portrait – historically considered as an expression of the self and its status – seems to face a dramatic representative shift, marked by the use of new elements and representational models.

Maurizio Cattelan's puppets, the body sections designed by Vanessa Beecroft, the multiple identities interpreted by Cindy Sherman and Matthew Barney display a tangible representative mutation, highlighted by the staging of a manifold, chameleonic and evanescent personal image that reflects an unstable and fragmented idea of the subject.

Masks that conceal the identity of the wearer, fragments of faces or limbs, projections of the subjective image on multiple bodies, technological prostheses and disguises are indeed common elements in many self-portraits of the late 20th Century which, within a process of detachment from the previous iconography, embody the signs of a broad social and symbolic transformation involving the very concept of subject and its modalities of representation[1].

The processes behind the development of this typology of self-portrait and the modalities in which it differs from the previous examples can be analyzed from different perspectives. In addition to the historical and artistic one, which is essential to understand the images, the phenomena of self-presentation are closely linked to sociological, philosophical and anthropological theories on the perception of individual identity and its transformation over time[2]. According to several sociologists and anthropologists, it seems indeed an acquired notion that individual members of any society share a common idea of the self and that this idea structures their perception and bounds between themselves and the others, reflecting on the way they represent themselves[3].

In order to link the phenomena of perception and representation of the self, we will examine a selection of self-portraits made in the last decade of the 20th century associating them with the theories on postmodern identity elaborated by Frederic Jameson. The focus on works produced mainly in the 1990s is motivated by the fact that they seem to reveal an interesting maturation of the features assigned by Jameson to the postmodern ego and its representation: fragmentation, decentration and multiplicity.

Concerning this, in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* Jameson describes the disappearance of the individual subject of the modern era and its replacement by the decentered ego of the postmodern culture through pictures, choosing examples from visual arts. In particular, he mentions the painting *The Scream* (1893, fig. 1) by Edvard Munch as the emblem of the modern age of anxiety, because it conveys "the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation" through which the individual expresses its subjectivity[4].
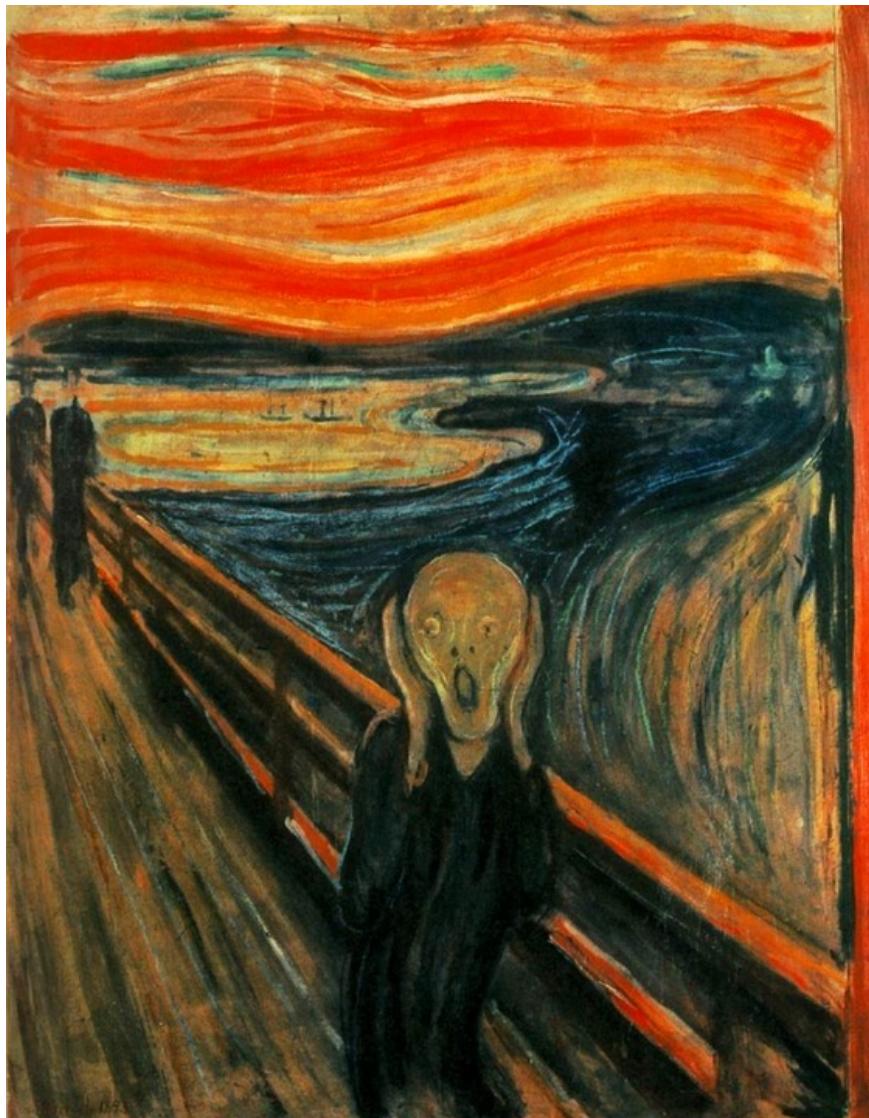
Figure 1. *The Scream* (1893) by Edvard Munch. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

Regarding the postmodern subject, instead, Jameson points out its incapacity of organize time into a coherent experience, connecting this inability to the "weakening of historicity" and to the "breakdown of the signifying chain" in language[5]. According to the critic and philosopher, if personal identity is the effect of a certain temporal unification, the result of the loss of ability to create a sense of continuity between past and future is a schizophrenic subject which lives in a perpetual present and experiences plurality, fragmentation and emotional flatness. Consequently, a painting like *The Scream* - which expresses strong affects, such as anxiety and alienation – cannot longer exists in postmodern time, because the very concept of expression presupposes a unified and unique self, a coherent temporal experience and some separation between what is internal and external to the subject[6]. As an example of an early stage of postmodern artistic production, Jameson mentions Andy Warhol's works, which reflect the emergence of a new kind of flatness, the breakdown of the distinction between high and low culture and the waning of affect[7].

In the case of Warhol's portraits, like Marilyn Monroe or his self-portraits, the subjects are multiplied, commodified and transformed into their own images, as the reference to their individual lives or emotions is suppressed: a movie star or a soup's can (fig. 2) are represented with the same indifference and depthlessness. The expression of complex emotional concepts or conditions through the portrait is eroded by the repetition of the subject to the extent that the personality disappears behind the sparkling seriality assigned to its medial image.
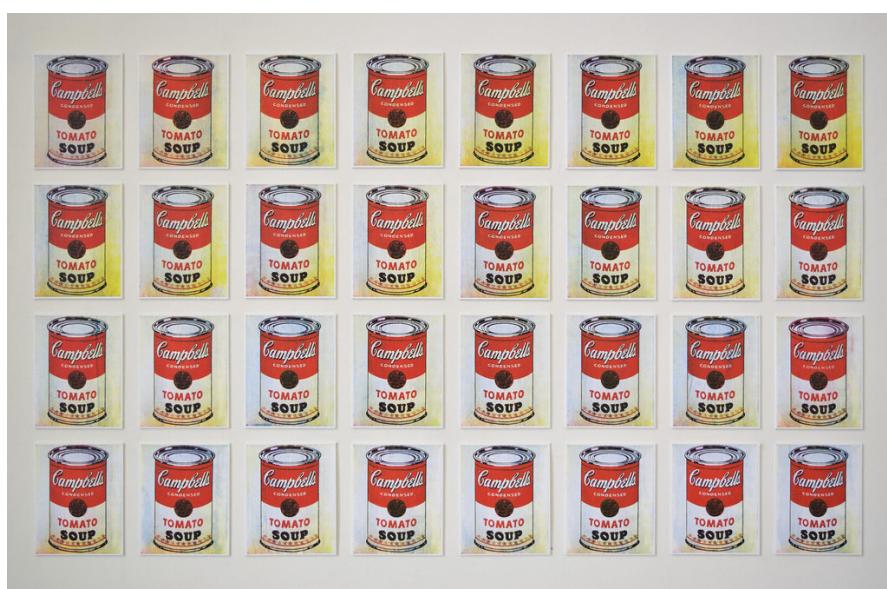

Figure 2. *32 Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) by Andy Warhol.
Photo by Wally Gobetz, June 17, 2007. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Therefore, in summary, the postmodern self as meant by Jameson is a fragmented, multiple and decentered subject who lives in an incongruent temporal dimension, connotated by a sort of emotional flatness and nourished by the images from the media.

According to the psychologist Kennet Gergen, this fragmentation of the self-conception corresponds to a plurality of incoherent and detached relationships, which invites individuals to play a variety of roles that erases the very concept of an "authentic self"[8]. Moreover, the postmodern subject is saturated with images from the media that "furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self"[9].

In line with these claims, the tendency to play different roles and to display multifaceted and fragmented versions of the Self appears as a significant component of several self-portraits of the 1990s, which seem to mature the transition from modern personality to postmodern personality, as described by Jameson and Gergen.

Multiple Identities

In 1997, for instance, Maurizio Cattelan realizes *Spermini* (*Little Sperms,* fig 3.), a self-representation made by hundreds of painted latex masks in the likeness of himself. The eloquent title refers to the process of human being's making, with its manifold possible results. As many other works by the artist, such as *Mini-me* (1999) and *We* (2010), *Spermini* investigates the thematic of personal identity through the representation of multiplied images and fictive alter egos of Cattelan, revealing a certain ambiguity promoted by the splitting into several faces or puppets who wear the artist's features like a mask[10].

The slight diversity of skin tones and facial features of *Spermini's* masks highlights the plurality that Cattelan assigns to the representation of his self: multiple, varied and fragmented. More or less dark, serious or smiling, in some installations the masks hang softly from the wall, devoid of content. In the same way, from a metaphorical point of view, the viewer who wants to understand something of the subject is deprived of useful contents: the artist dissolves in the multiplicity of his representations.

Figure 3. *Spermini* (1997) by Maurizio Cattelan.
Photo by ひでわく, August 21, 2017. Published on Photozou, Japan.

As Jameson claims about the depthlessness of postmodern pictures, *Spermini* doesn't provide any element on the artist's private life, personality or emotions. The expressivity of the portraits is abandoned in favor of an ironic representation where Cattelan's face become itself a mask, behind which we cannot detect anything. *Spermini* is not the only work where the expressivity and uniqueness of the modern ego is eradicated: in fact, Cattelan has created many works where his physical features, not exactly reproduced, possess slightly dissonant or caricatural aspects compared to the model, multiplied and serialized. Among them, we find *Super-Noi* (*Super-Us*, 1992-1998), a work consisting of numerous facial composites of Cattelan made by police sketch artists and based on descriptions provided by friends and acquaintances.

It is relevant to note that according to Gergen, the postmodern self is free to float from one image to another and arises only in relation to external images, which are conveyed to and received from others. Consequently, instead of the inner core of the past, the postmodern "interior" self is inhabited by others and their images, becoming through stages a relational self[11].

Precisely with regard to this, in *Super-Noi* the representation of the Self and the responsibility for defining it is left to others: the effect is a collective portrait conceived by Cattelan but accomplished out of his control. This process leads to a relational concept of the subject, forged on other's impressions and memories, where the "Me" of the Self becomes a plural "Us", as the title indicates.
If we assume that the single identikits represent a fragment or a version of the identity of Cattelan, it must be noted, however, that even as a whole they are not able to reconstruct a complete image of the artist, because we could not identify a self-core in them. As Gergen underline, in postmodern time the perpetual attack of external influences and images erodes the very sense of an authentic

core and abolish the distinction between the real and the presented self[12]. As a result, it cannot be established which is the real Cattelan between his representations, as well as it cannot be affirmed that his self-core lies in their whole. The tendency to elude categorizations and to realize chameleonic representations distinguishes also the work of Cindy Sherman, who has been creating photographic self-portraits since the end of the 1970s, highlighting and overturning the dominant models of representation of the female body. Starting from the famous *Untiled film stills* series (1977-1980, fig. 4), Sherman has composed photographic tableaux in which she portraits herself inside history paintings, films, fashion's and pornography's scenery, wearing costumes, wigs, props, prosthesis and makeup to interpret movie stars, valley girls, Renaissance ladies, clowns and sex dolls.

These representations are united by the constant presence of Sherman as the subject. Nevertheless, they are anything but real self-portraits: as Sherman declares in several interviews, none of the characters are her, because she is "really just using the mirror to summon something" that she doesn't even know until she sees it[13]. The body photographed, however, is her own body and this detachment between what is seen and what is represented produces an ambiguity that pervades all her works. In *Untitled #193* (1988), which is part of a series stemming from a collaboration with Limoges, Sherman models herself as Madame Pompadour, portraying the mistress of Louis XV as she gets older.

Figure 4. *Untitled #23* (1978) by Cindy Sherman.
Photo by Viola Renate, February 7, 2009. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

Although at first glance the work would appear to imitate the composition of an 18th-century portrait, there isn't a specific source and, as often happens in Sherman's production, the mimic of certain genre conventions presents distorted and defamilarized aspects. The fake breastplate, the imperfect make-up and, mainly, the big monstrous toes emerging on the bottom right corner, makes clear that we are not observing the portrait of a real person, but a representation of a fictional identity.

The same characteristics can be found with slight diversity in every work of the artist, such as *Untitled #276* (1993), which is part of the "fashion portrait's" series. In this case, the artist interprets a model who provocatively stares at the viewer, while her body is displayed as imperfect, the clothes are cluttered, and her pose is bored and clumsy. Even then, it may be observed a divergence between the apparent subject of the picture (a model on a magazine cover) and the altered and distorted way in which it is shown.

The most relevant aspect of these pictures, however, is the way Sherman uses her image and body without making it an autobiographical narrative, producing multiple fictitious selves that say nothing about her personal life, her emotions or experiences (fig. 5). Therefore, she works on identity focusing on how she can imagine herself, interpreting hundreds of possible personas, always remaining anonymous. In the late 1980s and into the '90s, Sherman expanded her focus to more grotesque imagery, like the mutilated mannequins of the *Sex Pictures* (1992). With their artificial appearance, they display a certain degree of similarity with the self-representations that simultaneously Matthew Barney develops through the Cremaster's movie cycle (1994-2002). In these films, he impersonates different hybrid identities, mixing autobiographical threads, such as his childhood plays in the sport fields of Idaho, with mythological elements. Through the creation of artistic alter egos, such as the "character of positive restraint" inspired by the famous magician Harry Houdini or the post-human character modelled on the football player Jim Otto, Barney redefines and forces the limits of the body, using his image to create personal identities in a perpetual metamorphosis[14]. The works of Vanessa Beecroft instead, as well as the portraits of Cattelan, display fragments of the artist's identity by multiplying them through the bodies of the models who compose her performances. Chosen on the basis of specific physical features in which Beecroft identifies herself, such as extreme thinness, they represent the personification of the drawings like those of the *Book of Food,* where she depicts herself in fragments.

Figure 5. *Untitled #282* (1993) by Cindy Sherman.
Photo by Johanna, June 9, 2012. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

Figure 6. *Untitled* (1993 – 1994) by Vanessa Beecroft.
Image courtesy of the artist © Vanessa Beecroft 2020.

In the drawings, the artist's body is separated and multiplied into immature, angular and skinny bodies that narrate the obsession of Beecroft with her own image and her compulsive relationship with food (fig. 6)[15]. Sketched with interrupted and concise lines, the drawings are defined by synthetic marks that separate the figures from the background, highlighting isolated portions of the body such as heads, hands and legs.

Figure 7. *VB45* (2001) by Vanessa Beecroft. Image courtesy of the artist © Vanessa Beecroft 2020.

The same fragmentation is reflected by the bodies of the models who, during the first exhibition (*Despair*, 1993) and afterwards, impersonate various features referable to the identity of the artist. Disguised, adorned and wearing wigs, the models of her performances together with the drawings form a plural ego, which aggregates different aspects of Beecroft's identity (fig. 7).

Final Considerations

They may be listed several other relevant self-representations of that time, however the characteristics manifested in the works of Cattelan, Sherman, Barney and Beecroft seem sufficient to delineate an overview of the most frequent representations of the identity in postmodern time[16]. In their works, the shift from the alienated subject of modernity to the fragmented subject of postmodernity, as described by Jameson, seems to have matured. If we compare their self-representations to Warhol's, which represent an early stage of this transition, we can indeed observe relevant differences.

In his self-portraits Warhol uses wigs and other objects to connote himself and multiplies his image, nevertheless his identity always remains strongly recognizable. In the process of reproduction and commodification – during which the expressivity of modernist works vanishes – the artist's image is indeed not fragmented and remains clearly identifiable in all its variations: the Warhol of the *Self-portrait* of 1967 (fig. 8) is undoubtedly the same person (albeit older) depicted in the *Self-portrait* of 1985 (fig. 9). In the self-representations of the Nineties, instead, the multiplication of the image and the make-up and disguise are used to stage different simultaneous versions of the self, where every fragment is slightly or very different from the others: Cattelan's multiple faces in *Super Noi* and *Spermini*, Barney's or Sherman's portraits reveal a modality of representation marked by plurality and based on the absence of a recognizable self-core. The disguised representation of personal identity eventually leads to the emptying of the personal image, filled with temporary and constantly changing content. The self of Cattelan, Sherman, Beecroft and Barney is therefore represented as "decentered, relational, contingent, illusory and lacking any core or essence", malleable and fluid[17].

Furthermore, if there is a reference on the artist's life and experience it is invariably vague and undetermined, placed in an indefinite time and mixed with other millions of references. The flatness of the images and the impossibility of decoding them in depth, reveal an anti-narrative way of telling, which doesn't convey substantial information about the subject. As Jameson highlights "it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory"[18]. The self-portraits of the 1990s represent in conclusion the plurality and fragmentation of the postmodern identity in a mature stage through an original iconographic model based on camouflage, multiplication and partitioning of the subjective image, diversified in all its variations. In them, the presented and real self are finally placed on the same level and reveal the equivalent function of every portrait of the artists: no longer the representation of an authentic identity, but infinite possible roles to play.
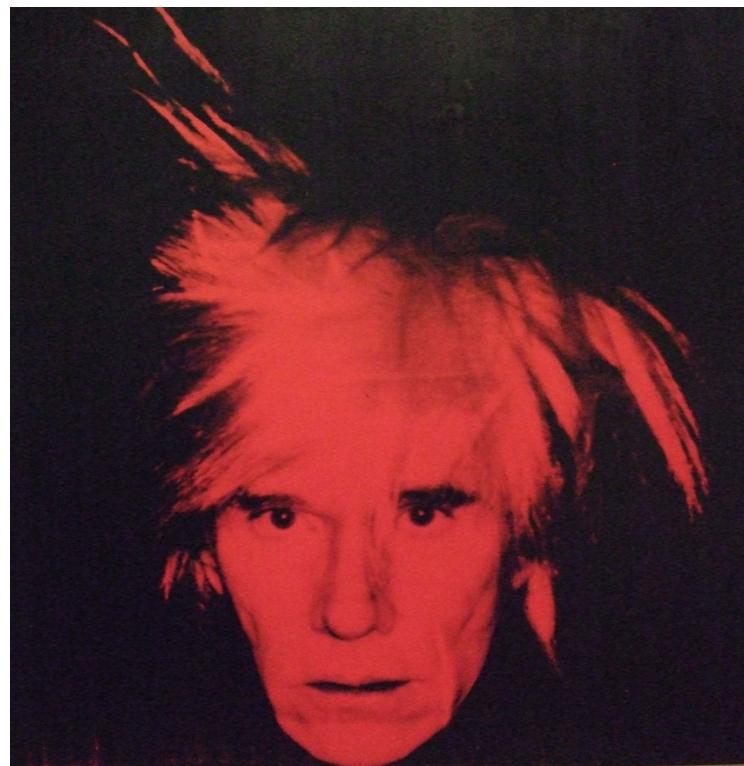
Figure 8. *Self-portrait* (1986) by Andy Warhol.
Photo by Jim Linwood, January 15, 2007. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

Figure 9. *Self-portrait* (1963) by Andy Warhol.
Photo by Fred Romero, August 3, 2017.
München, Pinakothek der Moderne. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

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Notes

[1] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 37-61.

[2] James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thomas & Hudson, 2014).

[3] William V. Dunning, "The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post Cartesian Viewer", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49, n. 4 (Autumn, 1991), 331-336; Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'identité. Séminaire interdisciplinaire dirigé par Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1977); Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in *The Language of the Self*, ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimora: John Hopkins University Press, 1968), 178-179.

[4] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, n. 146 (July-August 1984): 61.

[5] Ibid., 58, 71-73.
[6] Ibid, 61.
[7] The waning of affect is described by Jameson as a feature of the new depthlessness in art attributed to the cultural transformation of the Postmodernism. According to Jameson, in the Postmodern time the impact of the pictures on us must be thought in terms of intensity rather than affect, because we cannot reestablish the individual life or life-world which is their point of reference in the reality.

[8] Jameson, "Postmodernism," 7.

[9] Kennet Gergen, *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 6.

[10] Massimiliano Gioni, "Maurizio Cattelan, Infiniti Noi," Flash Art - Italy, n. 287, October 2010, 90. https://flash---art.it/article/maurizio-cattelan-infiniti-noi/

[11] James E. Cote and Charles G. *Levine, Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis,* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 26.

[12] Gergen, The saturated self, 155.

[13] Carol Vogel, "Cindy Sherman Unmasked", The New York Times, February 16, 2012.
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/arts/design/moma-to-showcase-cindy-shermans-new-and-old-characters.html?searchResultPosition=79; Betsy Berne, "Studio: Cindy Sherman. Interview with Betsy Berne", Tate website, June 1, 2003. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/studio-cindy-sherman. The complete sentence is: "I'm really just using the mirror to summon something I don't even know until I see it".

[14] Giovanna Zapperi, "Matthew Barney, or the body as machine", in *Cremaster Anatomies,* ed. Christiane Hille and Julia Stenzel (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 191-204.

[15] Emily L. Newman, *Female Body Image in Contemporary Art. Dieting, Eating Disorders, Self-Harm and Fatness,* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[16] For other examples of contemporary self-portrait please refer to the following book, which includes examples of artworks from the 1990s: Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, *The Portrait Now,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[17] Viktor Gekas and Peter Burke, "Self and Identity", in *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology,* ed. Karen S. Cook, Gary A. Fine, and James S. House, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 57.

[18] Jameson, "Postmodernism", 71.

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Complicity with Sign Systems
Postmodernism in the Field of Visual Arts[1]

Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen

Abstract

Postmodernism in the arts is double-faced: It not only concerns 'neo-expressionist' painting, but also a performative turn, initially diagnosed by Michael Fried. Influenced by poststructuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, the art scene underwent a significant change since the late seventies: Language and other sign systems took the lead so that the authority of the author was undermined, the work became part of a relational network, the beholder turned into a producer. Photography and performance were the media to articulate the change. It is argued that seemingly traditional media like painting in fact adopted a transmedia approach. Painting itself has a performative character, but it was also used to document performances and to perform a public persona. A focus on signs suggested a practice of complicity: artists performed in the growing art market and pleaded for an 'affirmative critique' that would change structures by inhabiting it. At the end of the eighties, AIDS activism put an end to this kind of postmodernist opportunism and reintroduced a sense of struggle. This caused an essential critique of the language approach and brought a new understanding of critical artistic practice, again connecting to the overall development towards performativity.

Introduction

Visual art's modernity ended twice: In 1967, Michael Fried raised a furious critique against the minimalists, because they attacked sculpture and transgressed borders set by modernism. The second end of modernity came about ten years later. It was the militant negation of 'dematerialized' post-conceptual art practices that – so it seemed – had lost all visual impact. This second coming of postmodernism in the arts was easier to identify: Architects like Robert Venturi or Michael Graves had done the same ten years before. Their eclectic buildings were aimed at ending functionalist ideology by re-introducing ornament and narration (Jencks 1977).

Fried disliked minimalism because of its 'theatricality.' A purist's stance: The kind of artwork he promoted was an aesthetic, organic whole, with the author as its origin and timeless meaning as its destination. The integrity of the work would be spoiled, Fried thought, by "what lies between the arts…" (Fried 1968, 142), the mixture of text and image, sculpture, and performance. It is not without irony that what disqualified minimalism for Fried – its performativity – became the core of postmodern artistic practice. The act, connecting artist and audience in a new way and deconstructing the 'work,' stayed the leitmotiv of artistic practice until the nineties, after 'Postmodernism' went out of fashion.

The twofold beginning of postmodernity in the arts indicates the complexity of the issue: In architecture, we deal with buildings labeled 'postmodern,' but only a few paintings or sculptures could be named as such. The 'late' postmodernism – neo-expressionist painting – lays a false trail. In the visual arts, 'postmodern' relates more to (immaterial) semiotic structures, performative actions, and a re-definition of art as an institution, than to specific styles. This connects postmodernism to poststructuralism. While the term 'postmodern' went out of fashion in the late eighties, the conceptual changes connected to its doppelganger kept on working (Foster 1984). Whoever deals with the impact of postmodernism on visual art will come across practices informed by poststructuralist theory already transforming the art world at the beginning of the postmodernist discourse in the mid-sixties and still resonating in post-postmodernism during the late eighties and early nineties.

Author, Work, Beholder: A Primer in 'Postmodernism'

In late September 1977, an exhibition opened at New York's Artist Space that made history: 'Pictures' collected five artists' work that – as curator Douglas Crimp claimed – were "picture-users" more than "picture-makers" (Crimp 1977, s.p.).[2] The exhibiting artists belonged to the first generation that grew up in a media setting of magazines, cinema, and television. They all shared the experience that their reality was not mirrored but *defined* by pictures. As Crimp explained in his catalogue: "To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in cinema. Next to these pictures, firsthand experience begins to retreat…" (Crimp, ibid.). It, therefore, became imperative to understand the picture itself. This is why these artists do not try to invent, but apply pictures already in public use. By taking up the existing discourse of images, they embrace its social and political function, they evaluate and redefine it. In his short film 'The Jump,' Jack Goldstein reuses images of a diver. He isolates them on a black background, he rotoscopes them (Fig.1). Through his treatment, the meaning of the original is transformed. One 'text' is doubled by another. The quoted image is split in the sense that beneath its new, 'allegorical' (Owens 1980) surface the traditional meaning is always pertinent. The new postmodern picture implies two images constantly referring to each other. The single image is no longer a funnel collecting every aspect of reference and meaning, instead it becomes 'centrifugal' (Joselit 2013, 43f).
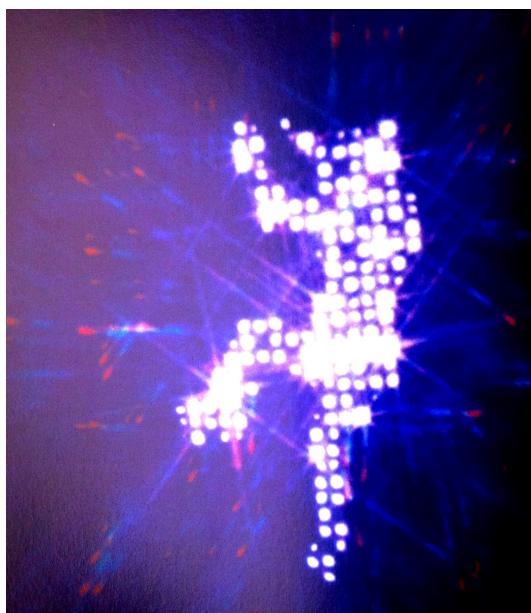

Figure 1. Jack Goldstein, *Still from the Jump*, 1978.
Image courtesy of the artist.

As the footnotes imply, Crimp drew not only on Saussure, but also on Benjamin and Lacan. Most notably, his understanding is shaped by Roland Barthes, whose first collection of essays was published in English in the year the exhibition took place. One of the essays in 'Image-Music-Text' is called 'From Work to Text'.[3] The artwork, which in modern times was taken as an aesthetic, symbolic whole, encased by an origin (i.e., an author) and an end (i.e., a represented reality or transcendent meaning) (Foster 1985, 129), becomes an element of a 'text', taken as a semiotic structure reaching far beyond the singular author or a community of experts. Crimp would be supported in his interpretation by his familiarity with Robert Smithson, who connected sculptural 'non-sites' in an exhibition to 'absent' sites outside in the landscape (Figs. 2-3). The 'work' is not the sculpture in the museum, not the accompanying photo of the site or a map. The 'work' was defined as an assemblage of all this.

Figure 2. Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite*, Franklin, New Jersey, 1968.
Image reproduced under 'Fair Use' condition.
© Robert Smithson

Figure 3. As a reference to Robert Smithson's art, we present a sample of one of his best-known works, taking into account his reputation in Land Art. Photograph of Robert Smithson's earthwork, Spiral Jetty, located at Rozel Point, Utah on the shore of the Great Salt Lake.
Photo by Netherzone, January 2004. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

If production becomes dominated by reproduction, it not only changes the character of the artwork, but also the position of the author. Far from being an autonomous individual, free to articulate own ideas or phantasies, the postmodern author is subjected to conventional sign systems. "As much as we speak language, language speaks us" (Burgin 1982, 145). As a postmodernist author you can only change systems by participating. In that, the author becomes more of a beholder. And, vice versa, the beholder is activated as a creator: She becomes a co-producer of the work as every 'use' of an artwork necessitates the activation of chains of signifiers. The re-articulation of the art institution in postmodernism changes significant concepts of modern aesthetics: "Modernist notions of autonomy, authenticity, originality, and self-referentiality are now… less hallowed than hollowed." (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 86).

Photography and Performance

Minimalism was a movement with a double face: It was open to a 'theatrical' and performative understanding of art. But the radical reductive way in which artists like Donald Judd arrived at their 'specific objects' (Judd 1965) was the last appearance of a modernist 'cleaning process' (Latour 2008, 19). What language could an artist use if sculpture or painting, imagination or depiction was 'tested away' and out of use?[4] Conceptual artists turned to "ready-made sign systems" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 88): language and photography. Language would allow to construct a piece without building it, as Lawrence Weiner used to say. In this way, language did not only help to avoid a marketable product, but it also established a relation to something immaterial, imaginary.

When Robert Barry presented photographs of a gas container on the street in Beverly Hills, did he really – as the title claims – release 1 liter of krypton gas into the atmosphere? Photography had the advantage of being a mechanically reproducible image-making technology, while connecting to mass culture as a comprehensive tool and to the political control it had inscribed (Fig. 4). This was not the 'arty' photography known as 'pictorialism,' mimicking the expression and subjectivity of painting. It was photo-journalism which became the paradigm of conceptual artists.

Looking at works of Robert Smithson, Dan Graham and Douglas Huebler, Jeff Wall (1995) detects an attitude that Paul Strand, Brassai and Walker Evans introduced through casual observation. The picture makes its appearance in practice, relinquishing the sensuousness of surface and the preparatory process of composition, and emerges on the wing, out of a photographer's complex social engagement. It records something significant in the event. Wall highlights the mimetic character of this 'artistic' type of photo-journalism: "The profusion of new forms, processes, materials and subjects… was to a great extent stimulated by mimetic relationships with other social production processes…" (Wall, 1995, 35) Artists imitated photo-journalists to create pictures. Their photography was a performance.

Figure 4. Robert Barry, Inert Gas Series, 1969. © Robert Barry.
Image available on Modern Art Notes Podcast and reproduced under 'Fair Use' condition.
For more, you can subscribe to the podcast on Robert Barry, James Merle Thomas by Modern Art
Notes, posted by SoundCloud and shared by Art Style Magazine stories.
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Wall enriches the performative observation of Michael Fried: To produce art after modernism, you have to enter sign systems, social systems of behavior, institutions. The allegorical character does not only apply to images but also behavior. Mierle Ukeles Leiderman adopts the role of a cleaning woman to conceptualize the hidden institutional structures of the museum (Fig. 5). In this sense, social action is to be taken like photography and language: they are all 'vessels' for artistic thinking. Performance, because of its temporary character, appears to be 'incomplete' like Smithson's non-sites, relying on the re-materialization in photography. It has the photographic visualization deeply inscribed into its volatile structure (Auslander 2008). The performance proved to be elliptic like conceptual art as already its programming anticipated the finitude of the event and its complementing documentation. In this sense, as well, the works of conceptual artists like Richard Long or Bruce Naumann can be classified as 'performative':

> The picture is represented as the subsidiary form of an act, as photo-documentation. It has become that, however, by means of a new kind of photographic mise-en-scène. That is, it exists and is legitimated as continuous with the project of reportage by moving in precisely the opposite direction, toward a completely designed pictorial method, an introverted masquerade that plays games with the inherited aesthetic proclivities of art-photography-as-reportage. (Wall 1995, 36)
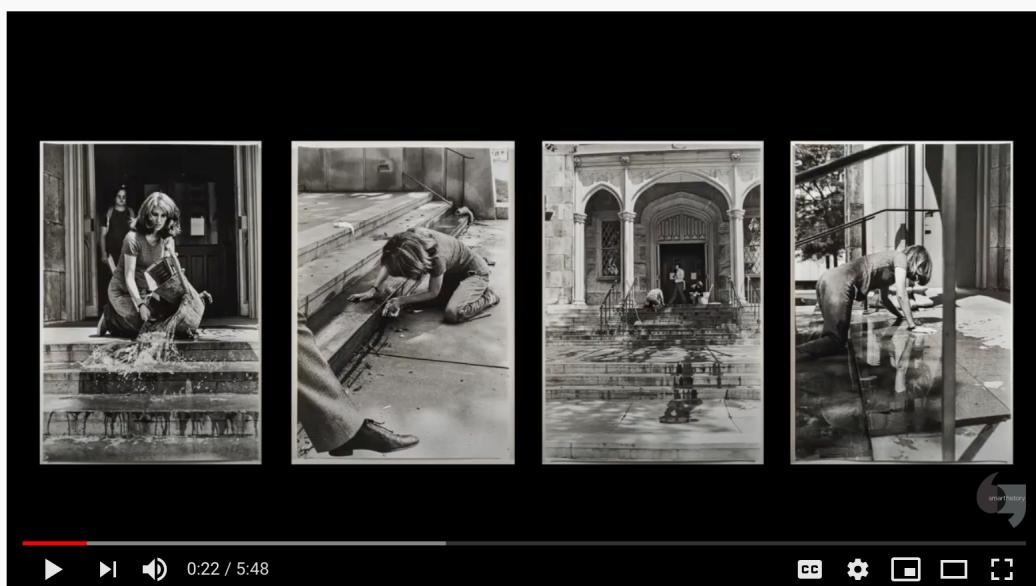
Figure 5. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenace Outside,*
Performance view Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford 1973
Image available on YouTube Channel Smart History reproduced under "Fair Use" condition.
Atheneum Museum of Art © Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Painting as 'Institutional Critique'?

How can we connect a 'postmodern' artistic practice to the stereotype of postmodern art, the neo-expressionist painting of the early eighties? Was it as retardataire as critics like Benjamin Buchloh (1980) or Hall Foster (1984) and their many followers among journalists claimed? "Were critics' claims and artists' works really in sync?" asked Alison Pearlman in 2003, stressing the continuity between this kind of painting with Andy Warhol and conceptual art. In 'Flashback' Philipp Kaiser (2005) brought together protagonists of the epoch to revise their judgments and look for a conceptual backbone in neo-expressionistic painting because "The phenomenon of figurative painting…was in many cases not long-lived. Yet the myth of a subject-centered, anticonceptual gut-level painting still tenaciously persists in many people' minds." (ibid., 16) "Could it be possible that we might find in apparently expressive gestures also forms of an institutional critique?" asked Isabelle Graw (in Kaiser – moderator, 50). "Could for example Martin Kippenberger be considered an artist critical of institutions?" To embed eighties' painting into a narration that connects the achievements of the seventies and the conceptual approach of the so-called Pictures Generation, we must overcome the fixation with the seemingly retrograde painting and look for the very practices surrounding it.

In the eighties, painting changed by absorbing elements of installation art, photography, and performance so that Helena Kontova (1989, 86) even talks about a 'multimedia approach' when she observes that painting is just a "fragment of a more complex situation." Painting became – like photography – a pictorial reproduction of an event or installation. Salome would 'restage' his early performances in colorful pictures as did Cindy Sherman, reenacting her public acts as nurse or secretary in public spaces in photography. It is important to mention the cinematic background of this type of painting. K.H. Hödicke, the influential artist and mentor, would say that a movie is nothing but 240 paintings on one meter. (See Schmidt-Wulffen, 1985, 37). In this sense the painting is related to an ongoing activity of which it is illuminating only a single stage, connecting to a before and an after. The often-used reference to expressionism should be replaced by another spontaneous flux, that of the cinema. Nearly every artist of this time has a cinema experience, admiring cinema's temporality, mode of narration, and transience.

To paint after a photographic template became the rule: This holds for Gerhard Richter as well as for Sigmar Polke. In Martin Kippenberger's studio, you could find a basket filled with photos, comics, jokes, where he and his fellow artists – Büttner, Oehlen, Herold – could help themselves. With this use of ready-made images the painter, in contrast to the seemingly subjective form of expression, adapts to a preexisting visual language, to a social system (Fig. 6). As Albert Oehlen said: "We read the paper in the morning and paint around noon. The state is responsible for the results." (Schmidt-Wulffen, 1985, p. 56). These artists would immerse themselves in what is, so that the political status quo could document itself on the canvas. (One should not forget that the militant political context artists like Albert Oehlen or Werner Büttner left before they became 'painters').[5]

Figure 6. Martin Kippenberger, Untitled, Series Dear painter, Paint for Me.
Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2012.
Photo by Esther Westerveld, July 9, 2012. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

What differentiates painting from photography is a refusal of technical reproduction. However, these painters don't introduce manual labor to open a stage for the unique, expressive gesture; on the contrary, they test how convention governs their bodily movements and their imagination. From the social protocol of the gesture it is not far to create a public persona as a testimony: Martin Kippenberger created a rich oeuvre of painterly identities, including Superman and the 'Eiermann,' who gives birth to art like a hen to eggs. When describing the postmodernist paradigm, 'performance' has different connotations, acts on several levels. It does not only denote the artistic genre of performance; it also refers to the practical use of signs, to the practice of the artist. But it also connotes the blurring transition between the artist's public persona and how it is constructed by doing art (in contrast to performing the life of a critic, curator, or teacher).[6]

Complicity

The art market, until the eighties marginal for artistic practice, suddenly opened a specific performative stage. Beginning in the mid-seventies, it underwent a drastic change. The number of artists in the US grew between 1970 and 1980, by around 67%. New York counted 197 galleries in 1965; in 1977, there were 2909. Young artists could be promoted faster in a new all-embracing communication system. When Julian Schnabel opened his first solo show at Mary Boone, all his paintings were sold out for 2,500 to 3,000 dollars. Two years later the same thing happened, but prices were at $40,000. A middle-sized Jeff Koons cost around $40,000 in 1987, in 1989 the price doubled, in 1990 you had to pay $190,000. The auction houses, starting to sell contemporary art, contributed to the development. Incredible profit margins and new transparency – you could learn about the potential profits by reading the results of the auctions worldwide – attracted new audiences (Fig. 7).

In the aftermath, Hollein (1999, 37) observes a radically new position of art in society. Artists and collectors no longer were an encapsulated, sworn-in community, but suddenly stood at the center of post-industrial society. The reason for this was the economic growth due to neoliberal governments like the one of Margaret Thatcher (starting 1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980). "In the eighties", writes Hollein, "artists became fully aware of their role in the art-market system, taken in a more or less voluntary way. That was probably also the case earlier, but for the first time a generation of artists accepted these mechanisms of the market openly." (Hollein 1999, p.38; my translation) The market opened a stage to perform public personas; it became a medium of the work. When Koons was accused that his works were superficial, vulgar, and pandering, this was part of his artistic strategy.
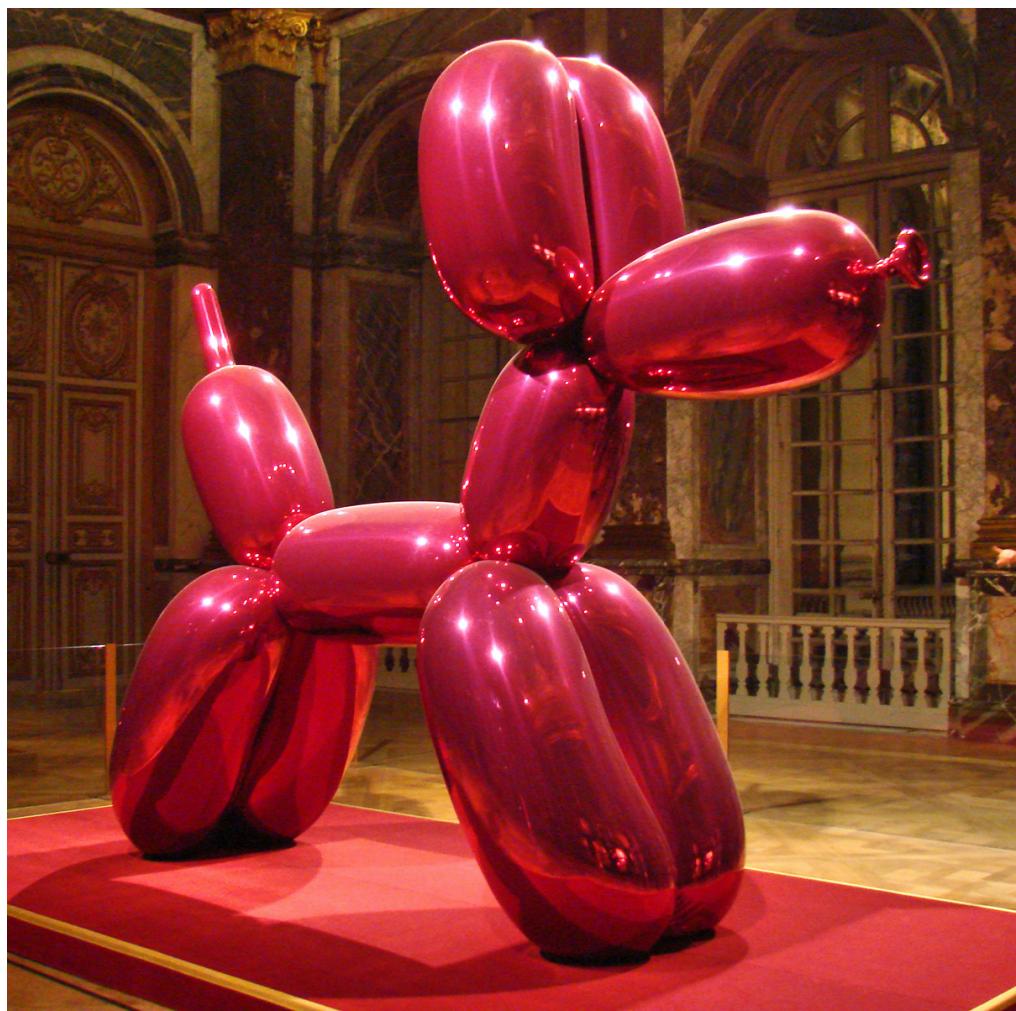
Figure 7. Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*. Photo by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra.
Château de Versailles (Salon d'Hercule). October 25, 2008.

Here 'complicity' became a significant issue. In 1986 a group of artists met at Pat Hearn Gallery in New York to discuss a recent development: 'From Criticism to Complicity'. The talk at Pat Hearn Gallery is also interesting because only a few months later the theoretical premises of this discussion were already outdated. After 1987, because of a financial recession and rising political conflicts, the idea of subversion by complicity lost its attraction. Postmodernism came to an end. The keyword of the discussion was 'desire'. Desire was meant as a term to counter the rationality and the 'cleaning processes' of earlier forms of art. It was, however, the desire to consume. "There is a stronger sense of being complicit with the production of desire," confessed Haim Steinbach, "what we traditionally call beautiful, seductive objects, than being positioned somewhere outside of it." (Nagy, p. 149) The art object is now placed strategically into the larger scenario of political and social reality. It interacts in a significant way and these interactions are made visible. Halley refers to situationism when he calls this work a "situationist object" (ibid., p. 150). Halley feels as if he lives in a "post-political situation": Instead of obtaining a critical discourse of the social, the work should functionally make part of it, producing an "affirmative critique." The practice of these artists, usually called "Simulationists," appears to be a translation of the poststructuralist theory of the signifier. It is a resonance of Roland Barthes' idea of a second-order sign, a stolen language, that could only be deconstructed from inside. It refers to Jacques Derrida's concept of the circularity of language: Whoever wants to destroy metaphysics will get tangled up in it. Michel Foucault found political power inscribed into everyday practice. Power is always there, and you never can be outside of it. Consequently, artists developed a 'local' institutional critique that was performed inside the museum, inside the circulation of goods. As Barbara Kruger claimed: "One has to work within the confines of the system." (Hutcheon, 1989, p.140)

But it was Jean Baudrillard, his ‚Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign' published in 1981, who helped expand a practice, already used by the so-called Pictures Generation, to objects. Baudrillard (1981, 30) developed the idea of 'symbolic exchange value' as neither the older Marxist tools of 'use value' nor 'exchange value' would sufficiently describe the role of objects gained as signs in late capitalism. Baudrillard claims that the product has the same relational existence as the phoneme in linguistics. Its meaning is articulated in relation to other objects, by difference, in a hierarchical code of meanings. And these meanings help acquire status in society. Using ready-made objects in her works, the artist can deal with the sign value that these objects have in their social context. Creating new assemblages of objects equals deviant meanings. In the face of the growing art market, this type of strategic complicity proved to be hugely successful in financial terms, so that the critical impact that the artists claimed lost its credibility.

Criticality

In 1987 you could find a strange installation in one of the New Museum windows on Broadway. A photograph of the Nuremberg trial was re-used. Also, the pink triangle on top of it was a quote, referring to the Nazi stigmatization of gay people. In neon letters it said: Silence = Death. Silhouetted photographs were added to the historical photo, of "AIDS Criminals": Senator Jesse Helms, the televangelist Jerry Farewell or the columnist William F. Buckley. The piece was produced by an artist-activist group called ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, founded in the same year. The artistic community in New York suffered terribly from the AIDS crisis. No artist who had no friends who died. Their death apparently was the result of price-gouging by the pharmaceutical industry, keeping drugs as expensive as possible. And it was the consequence of the neo-liberal politics of the government. The fight against AIDS created awareness for other political conflicts, motivating a return to the real and a critique of poststructuralist theory and its focus on signs and language. As Douglas Crimp (1987, 7) wrote at the time, art was not only a consumer object; it does have the power to save lives.

ACT UP became a model for an alternative understanding of artistic practice: Propelled by political necessity, artists ventured beyond the art world, directly reacting and intervening in ongoing political events. They escaped a conceptual framing that made the abstract structure of language a model to apprehend and organize art. To take position in political conflict changed the postmodernist claims concerning authorship, artwork, beholder. Shared activity was rated more powerful than the efforts of a single author, might he be a 'social construction' or not. The single voice appeared weaker in public debate.

The collective replaced the audience: While postmodernism still preached to a passive recipient, now what was a beholder became a teammate. Differences between author and activist disappeared. They were united by the sharing of political aims and political practice. And the work was not evaluated by social prestige or sign exchange value, but by efficiency. The change in political climate went together with a change in critical theory. 'Universal Abandon', a special issue of Social Text, allows a symptomatic view. All its contributors question the linguistic model. State repression, says Cornel West, cannot be understood through linguistic models. "Power operates very differently in non-discursive than in discursive ways " (Stephanson 1988, 271) And Chantal Mouffe attacks the thesis of the all-inclusive language – so essential for the appropriation strategies of postmodern artists – by making a difference between philosophical argument and political action.

Even if language appears to be an indispensable requirement that "does not mean that we cannot distinguish within a given regime of truth between those who respect the strategy of argumentation and its rules, and those who simply want to impose their power " (Mouffe 1988, 38). The paradigmatic role that language structure had for postmodernism is destroyed. Practice cannot take its place, because practice is always embedded in the social and therefore opposes any generalization as a 'paradigm'. In that sense Cornel West also criticizes 'thick' forms of political theory like 'economic exploitation' or 'bureaucratic domination', apparently reacting to AIDS activism and the situation of other marginalized groups in society. He asks for a 'philosophy of practice' that extends the political to all spheres, domains, and cultural practices. His emphasis lies on 'practice', articulating and embodying a philosophical attitude. Theory, says editor Andrew Ross, must leave the 'high ground' and get practically involved in the diversities of everyday life. The links of poststructuralist networks should be "articulated, or bound together, from contest to contest, and from moment to moment" says Ross. (Ross 1988, xiv) ACT UP and its political protest concerned the gay community and gave it visibility and a voice. The movement gained a paradigmatic quality, because it became clear that society was not built by specific social classes so much as by a patchwork of minorities, which had to fight for their rights. Feminism had laid much of the groundwork for this view of society, which introduced female identity as dependent on discourse and social construction. The concept that 'woman' is not a natural given subject but the result of the use of language games and habitual behavior, following political interests, as is the perception of other groups like people of color or migrants. This turn to a practical confrontation with the peculiarities of daily life calls to mind the new field called 'cultural studies', a critical offspring of postmodernism. Also, cultural studies perform an empirically engaged analysis, using – among other tools – anthropological methods.

Young artists would get to know these new approaches to a sound and interventionist practice for example at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Teachers here would be artists like Dan Graham or Martha Rosler, who knew the activism of the seventies. On their reading lists, they would not only find poststructuralists like Michel Foucault or Louis Althusser but also representatives of cultural studies like Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, or Edward Said. At the end of the postmodern paradigm, these students were trained to deal with micropolitics, giving voice to minorities. As Bordowitz (1989, p. 8) says in 1989: "What seems useful to me now is to go out and do work that is directly engaged, that is productive – to produce work that enables people to see what they are doing, that enables them to criticize what they are doing…"

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Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen is professor of art theory at Free University Bolzano, where he established the Major in Art. He also holds a honorary professorship for artistic knowledge at Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen. After studying philosophy, linguistics and communication design in Cologne, Konstanz, Wuppertal, Schmidt-Wulffen worked as an art critic in the Rhein area, closely related to the Cologne art scene. As director of the Kunstverein in Hamburg (1992-2000) he opened the stage for artists like Olafur Elliason, Pierre Huyghe or Carsten Höller. He was the rector of the academy of fine arts Vienna (2002-2011), introducing one of the first practice-based PhD programs on the continent, and of the New Design University St.Pölten (2011-2016).   Stephan.SchmidtWullfen@unibz.it

Notes:

[1] Translation: Christopher Mühlenberg

[2] The exhibited artists were: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith. Helene Winer, director of Artists Space from 1975 until 1980, restricted exhibitions to artists not yet represented in galleries and exhibiting there only once (Pearlman, 2003, p. 38). Artists like David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Matt Mullican, or Thomas Lawson did not participate in 'Pictures' but counted to the same movement. (See: Lawson 1979).

[3] Roland Barthes, 1977. See especially "From Work to Text," ibid., 155-164.

[4] Judd's text "Specific objects" is a resume of don'ts and do's: the sculpture is composed of parts and is, therefore, 'anthropomorphic.' The painting developed into a self-referential object lost its representative function and fraudulent illusionism but didn't even reach the status of sculpture. The 'specific object' came closest to being "completely objective, purely practical or merely present." Judd, 1965.

[6] History is a test of relevance: Today, the pupils and pupils of pupils of Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen testify their artistic significance. With Charline van Heyl, Jutta Koether, Cosima von Bonin we find a female translation of Kippenberger's machismo; Seth Price or Wade Guyton follow Oehlen's revitalized abstractions in the third generation.

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See Through

Anna Kristensson

Abstract

'See-through' means not to get deceived by something, to detect the true nature, to realize and understand (Dictionary 2020). The essay aims to provide a context to reflect upon design, to see through the layers of aesthetics that cover our reality. It invites the reader to explore the relations between a reference its designed representation from several perspectives. Through the lens of philosophers such as Baudrillard, Plato, and Wilde, different point of views upon aesthetics and its impact ultimately creates an understanding of the subject from several standpoints. This topic is also reflected in examples from the contemporary art field that explores different mediums and definitions of representations. Through art a discussion arises regarding mediums and definitions of reliability to its reference. By analyzing visual communication and aesthetic choices in terms of color and typography, we can see why the visual surface plays a role in influencing its viewer and relation to a reference. Furthermore, this essay is created to promote awareness and raise examples of reconnecting aesthetics with reality in a more transparent manner, going beyond deceiving aesthetic choices.

Theoretical

> The world of design is the terrain of a masquerade. Things are not what they seem, they pose, they hide behind the surface, they pretend to be something they are not. Whether they are of the mass-produced type or the art gallery variety, I often feel there is a discrepancy between the way they look and what they are, I feel like their surface is misleading.[1] (Helvert 2014)

Designers select information from reality and make visual representations of it. In that process, selection naturally creates a discrepancy between the designed object and the reality behind it. Design can stay true to its reference, however, added decoration and manipulation through the fascination of design can create an illusion. Some designed realities are untrue to its reference and ultimately serve the purpose of misleading. Due to this, designers learn to justify all the visual components to be accurate, true, and justified to the reality it represents. The dilemma is that this approach has no certainty to be true since aesthetics creates the option of design being unjustified.

The discrepancy between the reference and a designed representation can be reflected upon the framework of the 'outer physical manifestation' and the 'inner manifestation'. These two factors are heavily connected. The inner manifestation is the physical reality, in which a product gets created. It includes several aspects such as intentions, production, labor, and politics. The outer manifestation is the last step before the product reaches the shelf in a store, it's the process of packaging, a surface that reflects the background in which the product was created (Folkmann 2017). The role of designers is to use information about the product's background and visually communicate it. These communication tools are aesthetics, "a particular individual's set of ideas about style and taste, along with its expression"[2] (Dictionary 2020). These expressions can be contraindicative or truthful to the product depending on the designer's decision of using aesthetics. The 'outer manifestation' is the reality of the product in which consumers engage with, not fully being able to engage in the background and the inner manifestation of the product. The content of the outer manifestation is therefore a reflection upon aesthetics, surface, trends, historical reaction, competition, and politics (Folkmann 2017).

The philosopher Jean Baudrillard writes about the relationship consumers have to the outer manifestation of products. Since consumers can't interact with the inner manifestation of a designed product, they only engage with a designed representative reality. Baudrillard, therefore, refers to these designed realities as 'hyper realities', they are hyper-realistic and we live by them as if they were our unprocessed reality (Baudrillard 1990).

The topic regarding the relationship between reality and representation goes back to the 5th century BCE found in the philosophy of realism by Plato. "He warned about the dangers of indulging in both mimetic and narrative representations of the world." [3] Plato's thought raises the discussion, what's more real, a representation of reality or reality itself? And what is the issue of claiming it to be a common rule that knowledge can be found in representations of the world (Worth 2012)?

Various Forms of Representations

When discussing a representation concerning reality, the factor of which form the representation has made different impact. All forms of representations can be manipulated to an extent where it loses reliability to its reference, yet some forms can reflect a truth more convincingly. Through following philosophical theories and contemporary art we can reflect on these different forms and mediums of representation and raise questions of how we believe they should relate to our world.

Since aesthetics are visual components based on an individual's expression that can be applied through all kinds of forms, an interesting discussing rise regarding some forms that seem to be more reliable and realistic than others. For example, when an individual reproduces reality and uses aesthetics with the expression of a painted art form, the distance between the representation and reality becomes separated by the viewer being able to trace brush strokes. In comparison, when the reality is reproduced in the form of photography, aesthetics can reflect a highly realistic expression. The product carried by visual choices determents our ability to judge how realistic it seems, but it doesn't say much of how well reflected it is

towards its reference. Even though painted art might seem distant to reality, it can be a more fair representation of it than a manipulated photograph. Since the roots of photography are based in a technical manner connected to science, it seems to also carry values and meaning and truth. Aesthetics used in images are the most precise expression of reality, it tends to deform reality in such a sublime way that you sometimes can't understand the border of what is real and what is a modified representation. "The fashion industry is notorious for its heavy-handed use of digital manipulation software, and has fallen under criticism for introducing 'false images 'into the mainstream and passing them off as real" (Young 2010). This manipulative way of using aesthetics in expressions to fool the viewer's perception of what is real has consequences. The result is that actual norms and meaning in our society get created through not reality itself but a modified representation of reality (Baudrillard 1990). Joseph Kosuth is a conceptual artist that is well known for searching for meaning in the relation between representation and reality. He involved Plato's Republic in his works by leaving the viewer with questions about what kind of representation of reality is more real and what form carries the representation of reality the best (Smith 2011)?

Figure 1. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs,* 2020.
Photo by Willian Cromar, May 12, 2010. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

In Joseph Kosuth's exhibition, *One and Three Chairs* (1965) show the description of a chair, the actual object itself, and a photograph of it. The following dilemma is presented, "If both photograph and words describe a chair, how's their functioning different from that of the real chair?" (MoMA 1999) To reflect on the exhibition of Kosuth the definitions of representations concerning references have to be mapped out. The photograph and the written definition of a chair are only existing in relation to the creation of the physical object, although there are few differences. The photograph has been created after the physical chair was made, and the written definition of a chair could have been created both before and after the physical chair was created. What unites the photograph and written definition as representations of a chair, is that they both communicate functions of a chair, which they can´t carry. A chair is an object created to have the function of sitting, only the physical object can hold the true reference to what a chair is. Therefore, the two definitions of a chair are descriptive to the physical reference.

Joseph Kosuth shows that the connection between definitions can be very true to each other, and difficult to separate, but a common rule in the relation between reference and representation is that the reference can't fully grasp what it´s referring to. The exhibition leaves the viewer to decide what is more real when all definitions of a chair seem to be true. For me, this exhibition shows examples where references and representations go together and are linked despite their differences in format - relations that I would encourage in the design industry.

In the exhibition, we can see the translations between reference and representations, but in reality, we often don´t get exposed to representations complete source and background. This ultimately can create discrepancy and a dilemma. It's important to question these relations since representations around us are only a reflection, naturally not grasping its reference fully. The representation itself can't be a common rule to be trusted upon since there are no guarantees that it is truthful or not. "It is possible to make a representation of something without knowing the thing represented. Artists mislead their viewers into thinking that knowledge lies in the represented (mimetic) object"[4] (Worth 2012). There are therefore no guarantees that designs can communicate a representation of the reality behind based on true knowledge.

Aesthetics Influence and Impact

If we can't completely trust the various representations of the world, should we think of them as less worthy because of their unreliable mechanisms? The philosopher Oscar Wilde argues that life has an imitative instinct to find expressions in forms. He stated that "What is found in life and nature is not what is there, but is that which artists have taught people to find there, through art" (Wilde 1881). This raises questions regarding what visual aspects can be worked with to create meaning and influence and what aesthetic tools are guiding consumers? To examine the impact of aesthetics expressed on products, the usage of visual tools in marketing strategy is a starting point to get an understanding of what influences consumers. Through the surface of trends and aesthetics, people are being taught to adhere to a certain set of values. In many ways Oscar Wilde's theory is correct, the sustainable movement is very much developing because consumers learned to appreciate a "greener' production through design and aesthetics. This is clear because a consumer can't engage with the physical production of a sustainable product themselves, only through the representation carried by aesthetic choices that they want to support.

In a study about manipulative marketing, persuasion, and manipulation of the consumer through advertising, "The green ad claims to have more potential than any other type of claim to mislead and deceive the consumers. The consumers are likely to accept green manipulative marketing because of their strong desire to improve the environment and their way of life"[5] (Danciu 2014). A dilemma is to be found in the market where consumers likely want to support the environment through their choice of a product purchase, without a guarantee that the product is true to the claims it's projecting through its designed surface. "The marketing communication is a mix of tools for promoting the products by transmitting particular messages to the consumers aiming to persuade them to purchase those products." Two main visual tools impacting meanings and emotions are color and typography (Danciu 2014). Colors associated with manipulative advertisements regarding sustainability are earth tone colors, like brown, green, and blue. This strategy is used because natural color relief, green, fresh and refreshing, healing the division, with trust and confidence (Ayatolahi 2002).

Figure 2. "Coca Cola Life" 2014.
Photo by Mike Mozart, TheToyChannel and JeepersMedia on YouTube.
December 18, 2014.Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Figure 3. "Innis free." Photo by Natalie Woo, September 14, 2015.
Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Another aesthetic tool used on products is typography, "the choice of a typeface can manipulate the meaning of that word" (Speikermann 2013). This means that different typefaces can communicate different meanings to what is being said. A typeface is a visual component that makes visual imagery stronger in its expression, conveying emotions and a sense of ambiance (Russell 2001).

In the Coca-Cola advertisement, a new "natural" and "healthy" soda line called Coca-Cola Life is launched. To underline these claims, earthy tones are used, the most dominant color is green. It's an active aesthetic choice of changing the logo into the green to enhance the sense of a natural product. The word 'life' written in a similar font creates a strong connotation to nature as well. Coca-Cola has been facing several lawsuits for maintaining a false green marketing facade. The lawsuit, filed in a California district court by the non-profit group Praxis Project, alleges Coca-Cola (KO) "deceives consumers about their health impact."

In a study of design elements used in greenwashing advertisements, the brand Innis Free Sunscreen was examined. 22 of 87 respondents thought that the colors used in the advertisement were the factor that made it appear like it was a naturally made product (Putri 2019). These two examples show how aesthetic choices such as typography and color can express the values of a product. Choices of colors can both fully express or mask (Danciu 2014). This are factors allowing a discrepancy between a reference and a representation. What happens if remove these aesthetic choices of masking?

Ray Nelson published the short story "Eight O'Clock in the Morning," 1963 which was later used by John Carpenter as the basis for his 1988 film "They Live". The movie raises the issue of endangering free will from the upper-class elite using manipulative advertisements for them to gain power over humanity. In this example, outer manifestation seems to be serving the people's needs, but the inner idea, however, is to make people absent-minded, consuming thoughtlessly and obey those who made you a cog in their machine. There are several aspects in the movie that points towards the importance of customers making more conscious choices for themselves. For example, the main character comes across "truth glasses" which makes him see through the surface of the advertisement and being reviled to the dark intentions of the design. The typography from the advertisement and products turns black and plain, the colors turn into white, the visual deceiving expression is gone and what's left is the truth. After that incident, the story revolves around him making other people aware of the truth while the authority tries to silence him (Carpenter 1998)[6]. An important standpoint in the movie is that messages communicated through various trends, in magazines, and on billboards are evolving dynamically on the surface while the other hidden reality stays in control as a constant. Is this only fiction or can it be applied to real-life as well?

A Development Beyond Aesthetics

There are ways to re-relate aesthetics and reveal the reference in a more truthful manner. An interesting aspect is why these new relations are emerging and how they take new forms of expression.

> Our world-view is, at some point, challenged and replaced by something new and different. Stylistic periods succeeding one another that cumulatively add up to history. We depend on critically reflecting upon the foundations upon which such narratives are built, the old history becomes a prerequisite for understanding the most recent addition. Styles certainly change over time, forms of production and consumption tend to remain more stable. However, from time to time, this foundation also changes" ... "Consider the emergence of particular economic, technical, and cultural conditions during the Industrial Revolution, for example, and the call for a new aesthetic and ethic from which industrial design emerged. (Folkmann 2017)

Today, contemporary global challenges such as sustainable development present a set of new conditions. The surface of design merges with the foundation on which it's built upon. Becoming one new thing together. To put this into the context of sustainability we can see that the outer manifestations have been affected by the development of increasing demand for environmentally improving products. The aesthetics of which companies use to follow the consumers lead, without necessarily changing the production which the surface of aesthetics should rely upon. "All products could be sustainable without us as consumers detecting it at the surface of the products" (Zafarmand 2003). We can already see examples of the new type of sustainable development calls for a new type of aesthetics when it comes to transparency and connecting the inner manifestations with the outside manifestations, especially when it comes to ingredients and methods of productions. Merging outer manifestation and inner ideas "It's a response to the needs and problems our world is facing today. It has to go beyond aesthetics" (Yuan 2020).

The set of conditions that emerged from sustainable development and calls for a new type of aesthetic is based on transparency and conscious actions. "Sustainable development recognizes the interdependence between three dimensions: the economic, the environmental, and the social performances of an organization" (Zafarmand 2003). These three pillars are connected to the sustainability of a product that stresses the importance of environmental friendly

decisions from refinement from the inner idea to the outer manifestation. In addition to that, I would like to add that the sustainable movement where the product connects the consumer as one additional link in the chain. That link comes down to consumer's responsibility in making choices that are sustainable by not over-consuming.

Our responsibility as consumers goes further than just buying the organic product. There are examples of campaigns that show how consumers can be more aware of aesthetics and their role in sustainable development, by targeting the aesthetics on packaging design. AAA is an anti-advertising agency that makes projects to show ways of revealing truths behind aesthetics. "For the most part, we have no idea who made the products we consume, with what, or how it's done. It's as if the product appeared magically on the shelves"[7] (Lambert 2007). In the AAA project, they produced a series of packaging design with information about the process of the product and who was involved in making it. To the project, they added an interesting part of involving consumers in raising awareness regarding this issue. On their website, it was possible to print out 2D templates of the packaging and encourage people at home to fold them and put the design into stores. By that action, I believe more people would be exposed to the project and maybe after seeing a person behind a process being more aware of that in other products as well. AAA project would, therefore, remind people that the products we consume are made by real people and attempts to remake the connections (Lambert 2007).

Conclusion

Can we see through the surfaces that cover our world? Sometimes glimpses of reality are shown to us as reminders. Whether it's though a documentary about labor, or material refinement we have a notion that a whole world and many stories are resting behind the final layer of aesthetics on a product. This can be easily forgotten. In the future, I hope to raise the question of what reality we want to get exposed to. In the movie Matrix (1994) a similar choice is presented by taking the red pill which creates a life of harsh knowledge, desperate freedom, and the brutal truths of reality, or the blue pill, a life of luxurious security, tranquil happiness, and the blissful ignorance of illusion. It seems like aesthetics not only hides realities abut also, the red pill, making us believe we only have one choice in the way we consume. So as designers, how can we come up with the mix of both worlds, a purple pill?

Author Biography

Anna Rebecka Kristensson is a designer who graduated from The Royal Danish Academy of Arts, now based in The Netherlands. Projects have a strong focus on editorial design, typography, and storytelling. The practice reflects the fundamental idea that design can be interpreted and used as a language on its own, communicating information in conceptual representations. Next to commissions and collaborations, Anna explores critical issues of design in self-initiated projects and written essays open for discussion. In this way, the design discipline becomes a generating tool to understand future roles and impacts of design worldwide. Anna-Kristensson@live.se

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(Re-)Constructing Reality
Jeff Wall, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida
On Postmodern Image Making[1]

Iris Laner

Abstract

Anything goes is a conviction that is central to the postmodern attitude. In a flat understanding it promotes pluralism, arbitrariness and relativism. As a consequence, postmodern art and culture has often been suspected of not only renegotiating orders of representation and sense making, but of destructing sense and negating the aesthetic, epistemological and ethical value of artworks. Considering Jeff Wall's visual reflections and Roland Barthes' and Jacques Derrida's theoretical reflections, I will take the concerns regarding a flat postmodernist conception of art and culture serious. By looking at some main points of reference, the context and the implications of the postmodern movement on the one hand and by analyzing pictorial and textual material on the other hand, I will develop an affirmative and, yet, not uncritical perspective on postmodern image making. In this understanding, postmodern image making promotes pluralism and variety. It problematizes dualistic setups such as original vs. copy or reality vs. fiction and underlines the prominence of repetition as well as difference. However, it also hints at the importance of holding a critical attitude, an attitude that aims at creating works that walk a fine line between referring to and developing a new approach, between recording, processing and creating. Such a postmodern approach to image making does not put the case for arbitrariness and boundless relativism. Rather, it is careful about trying and pondering not only the aesthetic, but also the epistemological and ethical gravity of alternative perspectives.

Introduction

A scenery dipped in grey; there are several wounded soldiers lingering in the middle of a bleak landscape. Their blood is pouring; their intestines are oozing out, and their eyes are staring into nowhere. Heavily injured bodies mingled with dead flesh mark the landscape. And yet, within this misery, there is an unexpected sprinkle of joy: A man is playfully sitting on the back of another, seemingly amused. A third one is kneeling in front of them: he is displaying a piece of human flesh. Happy faces revealing lightness and good mood: A small group of chums is sharing an enjoyable moment, whilst surrounded by massacred bodies, in the midst of the deadly events of war.

Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986) is the title of the photograph depicting the situation described above (fig. 1). At first glance, it appears to be a snapshot of an actual war scenery. Formally, as a photograph, it speaks of facts-based objectivity. Once it reveals to represent a counter-factual situation – dead troops don't talk in real life –, however, it triggers a moment of lasting irritation. Facing this inconsistency, the work by Canadian artist Jeff Wall recounts a contradictory story where documentary style photography and fictional storytelling overlap. War is unexpectedly framed as a frivolous matter, death and life turn into volatile states that change their determination. Pairs of oppositions cross their respective boundaries and infiltrate each other. Thus, the degree of reality grasped by photographic images is questioned.

Being set on the borderline between recording reality and creating fiction by deconstructing established categories of media-specific representation and storytelling, this photographic work of art can be regarded as an example of postmodern image making. Namely, it undermines hegemonic strategies of representation and sense-production. It plays with the illusion of reality and questions the existence of an original state. It rejects the binding principles of media-specificity in applying cross-media techniques. Unlike some of the more garish postmodern icons, however, it does so in a somewhat cautious and subtle fashion. Therefore *Dead Troops Talk* can be conceived as a reflection upon postmodern image making: It does not blindly utilize, but thoughtfully applies some of the relevant postmodern gestures of producing art. At this, it hints at the epistemological and ethical challenges reserved for postmodern image making. Accordingly, this photograph is a stimulating point of departure for canvassing postmodernism in art and culture in an affirmative, yet not uncritical way.

Figure 1. Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk*
(A vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986).
Photo by Jeremy Thompson, April 17, 2016. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.
Image selected by Art Style Communication & Editions.

In the following essay I will discuss some characteristics of postmodern image making by elaborating on Jeff Wall's 1992 photograph and some of his other works. In order to provide a terminological structure and a theoretical framework I will consider – within the sphere of postmodern influence – some reflections on image making, sense production, and photography by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and other thinkers. While the images will provide pictorial material for reflection, the texts on image making, photography, and signs in general will provide a conceptual scope for reflection. Similar to Wall's depiction, the theoretical approaches consulted are not exclusively uncritical towards some implications of flat postmodernism. Taken together they allow for a critical perspective on postmodern image making that underlines its freedom and transgression of accepted boundaries, but also reflects on the costs bound to it.

Notes on Postmodernism: Anything Goes?

Considering the term and the wide base of its use, it is not easy to grasp what postmodern means. Different, even diverging approaches are attributed to the term postmodern.[2] Postmodernism is used to describe the style as well as the content of theoretical reflections,[3] formal takes as well as textual aspects of artworks and cultural artifacts[4]. Moreover, it serves to characterize language style, social attitudes, political stances or moral behavior.[5] The postmodern may carry distinguishing features such as being ironic (Richard Rorty, Slavoj Zizek) or remaining serious (Jean-Francois Lyotard). Postmodern images sometimes display joyful colorfulness (Keith Haring); sometimes they drown in nihilistic darkness (Anselm Kiefer).

What seems to be shared amongst the majority of approaches is that there is a break with some central ideologies regarded as characteristically modern.[6] Inspired by the breakthroughs of post-medieval science and the ideals of enlightenment, modernity believes in knowledge, reason, progress, and the sovereignty of the subject.[7] Accordingly, with regard to art and culture, postmodern positions tend to undermine the concept of a knowing, self-conscious artist who comments on outer-pictorial reality by way of creating an artifact in an original way.[8] Instead, the postmodern underlines that image making is dependent on a context of production that exceeds the supposed identity of the artist. In this sense, image making is regarded as historically, politically, socially, and culturally situated; it refers – by way of quoting, for instance – to its own conditions, its context and other works.[9] Modern ideas of the genius and innovator who is able to represent the world in an outstanding way[10] are rejected. Rather, it is assumed that the point of making art lies in the creation of a plurality of perspectives that stand next to each other. Questioning the belief in the independent original, postmodern approaches regularly work with assembling techniques such as collage[11] or bricolage[12]. Also, appropriation[13] and reenactment[14] are popular methods of undermining the boundaries between original and copy. Not only the rejection of the polarity concerning original vs. copy is central to postmodern art production, also undermining the order of genres and the working with cross-media techniques is crucial.

Criticizing the ideological foundation of modernity, postmodernism promotes plurality and variety instead of unity and originality. The famous saying "anything goes"[15] by Paul Feyerabend supposed to capture the essence of postmodern attitudes initially refers to the deconstruction of a hegemony of knowledge production in the sciences. Throughout modernity rationally proceeding science had been declared as the ultimate producer of knowledge and truth.

Alternative sources of knowledge, like mythology, storytelling or folk wisdom, had been discredited. From a critical perspective it is underlined that such a hierarchical order is neither natural in corresponding to the inner logic of the world nor productive in securing scientific progress. Knowledge, in general, is regarded as produced and it is underlined that it is possible to know things also in other ways than in a straightforward rationally assured one.

Feyerabend questions the unlimited superiority of rational science when it comes to the production of knowledge. In a similar fashion, one of the founding texts of postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) underlines as well that the dominant modern concepts regarded as securing the production of knowledge and meaning have become rejected in the postmodern age. According to Lyotard, concepts such as God or the Subject serve to order reality, following the meta-narrative that there is an ultimate truth to be found.[16] He hints at the fact that in the recent era of information there is not only one legitimate way of producing knowledge, but several ways of doing so. These heterogenic strategies of ordering reality are not anymore subjected to arriving at the ultimate truth, but to their performative power. Lyotard describes the postmodern times as interwoven with a plurality of games and rules that might lead to disorientation and a loss of identity.

Pioneer postmodern thinkers like Feyerabend or Lyotard stress that there is not a governing principle of order and that there is not only one reality that could legally be regarded as objective or neutral. Their theoretical reflections mostly focus on science and knowledge, but they also touch on political, social, cultural, and aesthetic[17] issues. Concerning the production of artworks, the postmodern move focuses on the dissolution of the boundaries between mass culture and high art. Accordingly, established aesthetic values and judgments are also put into question.

The claim of plurality, variety, and equality has a productive side to it, since it promotes alternative, formerly suppressed ways of knowledge and sense production. However, critical voices underline that postmodern production of knowledge and sense is ultimately tantamount to the destruction of knowledge and sense. According to critics, the exuberant relativism promoted by postmodern ideas leads to a dissolution of epistemological[18], moral[19], political,[20] and aesthetic[21] values. *Anything goes'* provoking arbitrariness turns into flat meaninglessness and disorientation.

Jeff Wall: Photography and the Power
of Questioning the Reality of War

Taking these critical voices seriously, I now proceed to discussing Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* (1992). Although the image exhibits neither the irony, the nihilism, the overflowing colorfulness nor the yelling provocation of some icons of postmodernity, it tells a thought-provoking story about postmodern image making. Besides its implications for the aesthetic field, I want to consider this story also as a reflection on epistemological and ethical aspects of artistic practice and sense production.

In 1992 Jeff Wall finishes a photographic monument: Displayed in a huge lightbox, spanning over a height of nearly two and a half meters and a length of more than four meters, it presents a snapshot of war. The title of the artwork suggests that the battle infused situation depicted is set in Moqor, Afghanistan. The events date from 1986, referring to the Soviet interventions in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. The photograph gathers 13 more or less mortally wounded Red Army soldiers and one unharmed, probably local Afghan intruder in a barren, stony landscape. At the upper edge of the image the legs of two more people are visible, one wearing blue, the other military green wide pants. Several weapons, mostly rifles, shreds of cloths and equipment, bags, barrels, and a piece of corrugated iron are scattered around the scenery.

Although the historical framing, the lack of colors typical for battle scenes as well as the arrangement provoke an authenticity of the war scenery, a lingering doubt appears at the very start of regarding this image: namely that something is wrong. Wall is not eager to hide that there is a mistake here. Already the title of the work reveals that this is not war photography in a somewhat artsy dress. It is not documentation, but a fictional vision of war. Even though from a certain angle it seems to be quite clear that this scenery has been staged and the war depicted is not a serious threat, the image preserves its double-edged aura. Namely, as a photograph with its reference to an actual event of war in the caption it supports the belief in the veritableness of the happenings represented. In a commonly shared attitude, it appears as a documentation of reality rather than as a construction of a new reality touching upon the reality we know. *Dead Troops Talk* plays with the ambiguity of neither mirroring the outer-pictorial world nor being pure fiction, since it clearly expresses to actually care about the happenings in the past.

In order to create this ambiguous, highly reflective image Wall takes inspiration from cultural artifacts, especially canonic war paintings. Similar to other works, such as *Bagpack* (1992) or *Tattoos and Shadows* (2000), he refers to his own heritage – the Western history of art – by formally quoting well-known representations, such as (post-)impressionist depictions by the famous and influential painter Edouard Manet. Paintings are not his only point of reference. Wall is also inspired by photographic works as well as by cinema, theater, and even literature. For instance, *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999-2000), forms a visual impression of the opening scene of a novel (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Jeff Wall, *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue.*
Photo by Colin Howley, June 13, 2006. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.
Image selected by Art Style Communication & Editions.

Formally, in many cases Wall not only works with large sized formats and the backlit presentation of the final work. He also builds up his monumental photographs by assembling multiple photographic sections,[22] fashioned apart from each other: what appears to be a straightforward photograph is actually a digital montage. In *Dead Troops Talk* the digital montage comes down to an assemblage of groups up to four people that have been shot separately. Only afterwards, within the compounded image, these groups gather in a purposeful setting arranged by Wall and his team. Not only are the happenings staged, they are even staged in a different way than they appear in the final image, i.e. individually - the small groups apart from each other (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Detail from *Dead Troops Talk* by Jeff Wall. Photo by Ian Usher,
Art Institute of Chicago, July 31, 2007. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.
Image selected by Art Style Communication & Editions.

Creating this collage by means of photographic sections and giving it a touch of reality and wholeness, the work thematizes a paradox: It appears as a testimony of reality, yet at the same time, it exposes staging a situation that we experience as familiar, due to the common media circulation of images of war. The historical reference of the work's title underlines this paradox, because it adds an insistence that this image relies on a certain moment in the past, which can ultimately be viewed as a document of war. Again, it clearly indicates that it cannot be a document. The very phrase "dead troops talk" hints at the contradictoriness depicted in this work. Usually dead people do not talk. Wall's dead, however, are still talking. What we regard as normality, is silenced here. States that are accepted to exclude each other in everyday life suddenly come together.

The exhibition of paradoxical states is typical for postmodern image making, since it aims to question established orders of knowledge, sense-production as well as representation. In this case, however, it seems important to stress that the coming together of contradictory states is not arbitrary: it does not come down to a non-sensical, self-sufficient play with pictorial elements. Rather, the work shows a constructive concern introducing an alternative way of formally representing and telling a story about the events of war: Destruction, as undermining hegemonic strategies of representation and sense-production, and construction, as creating new approaches to representing and producing sense, go hand in hand. Herein, the artwork surely questions the possibility of a non-arranged, objective or neutral reality represented by an image.[23] Still, it highlights that the respective pictorial reality created is of great concern and is not random. In an epistemological respect, it is clear that the photograph shows something of importance. It addresses war, even if it does not witness a true war situation. At this, it also exhibits an ethical issue. It raises the question of how we should represent as well as regard events of war in an adequate way after we had seized to believe in the transparency, neutrality, and objectivity of war photography.

Postmodern Reflections on Photographic Images:
Indexicality, Referentiality and the Eventful Emerging of Meaning

Artists do not only make images. They constantly reflect upon image making, its meaning, and its implications. Many artworks speak of this reflection and are therefore indispensable when it comes to discussing practices of image making. Theoreticians reflect upon image making as well, although in a different way. In this section, I will consult some theoretical ideas in order to add a conceptual framework to the discussion of postmodern image making. I will focus on issues in the context of making photographic images, since the visual reflection I have introduced above focuses on the medium of photography. In the closing part of this paper, I will finally bring together the visual reflections and the theoretical ones. As mentioned earlier, the dissolving of the boundaries between original and copy on the one hand and reality and fiction on the other hand is one of the central motives of postmodern art and culture. Critical investigations of media-specificity form a great part of postmodern art production in general,[24] but with regard to photography they are particularly illuminating, since they often address the relation between original and copy as well as reality and fiction.

As mentioned earlier, they are highly relevant beyond the field of fine arts and as they approach crucial social concerns. This is because since its invention in the middle of the 19th century photography has been recognized as one of the most important media for documenting events. More than any other kinds of image photographs participate in constructing reality and the way we conceive it.[25] Accordingly, they do not only bear influence in an aesthetic respect, but also in an epistemological and ethical value.

Roland Barthes, one of the pioneer thinkers of postmodernism, reflects upon the characteristic elements of photographic images, from the perspective of making as well as experiencing photographs. He stresses that the photographic image witnesses the object photographed.[26] It does so not by copying, but by pointing to it. What I can see in a photo is not a direct reflection of the past, but the present trace that the object photographed had left on the light sensitive surface in the moment of activating the release. Semiotically speaking, the photo becomes an index.[27] It is not a symbol and neither an icon. While a symbol produces sense on the basis of convention (e.g. a crown on the head holds a sense of royalty), an icon carries meaning because it presents a similarity with the object represented.

The index, however, produces sense neither based on convention nor on similarity, but based on a direct physical relationship[28]. The photograph is directly related to the object photographed: its very existence is proof of its actuality. Still, it is not clear, what the trace, which the object in front of the camera has left in the photograph, actually means. Barthes speaks of photography as "a message without code."[29] indicating that a photograph "tells" a story, yet, does not provide the means to go beyond its literal appearance which he regards as "tautological."[30]

Since there is this tautological, self-referential void that elicits the need of the spectator to fill in sense and since in our culture this constant recognition has been hidden by assuming that photographs not only point to, but clearly present the meaning of reality, many postmodern thinkers[31] are fascinated by cultural and artistic practices of making and receiving photographic images. Like Barthes, they work on deconstructing the myth that photography documents real events in a neutral and objective way, so that all recipients would finally regard a photographic image in exactly the same vein.

Jacques Derrida is one of the most prominent French theorists who takes up Barthes' reflections[32] to point out that the referential relationship which a photograph installs not only eventually, but necessarily opens up various ways of making sense. According to Derrida, a photographic image refers to the past. The very fact that it refers to the past, however, does not imply that it is determined by the past. In Derrida's understanding, which has a lot of impact on theoretical as well as practical postmodern approaches, a sign like the photographic image can never be reduced to be a secondary expression of the signified.[33] Rather, a sign is a dynamic *marque* referring to the signified and producing sense eventfully in the very moment and context of reception.[34] What interests Derrida about the photographic sign especially, is that it is said to witness a unique situation, an event that normally passes by, but can be preserved with its help. If, however, photography's "specificity is this apparently irreducible viewing of the referent, this pointing at and seeing the referent, insofar as it has taken place only *once*," the photographic image turns out to be highly paradoxical, since it incorporates "the repetition of what has taken place only once."[35] Thus, what is unique cannot be repeated without losing its uniqueness. In other words, what is original cannot be copied without losing its originality. Accordingly, the photograph cannot be said to only record or document; rather, it creates something that goes beyond the event of being photographed. Derrida underlines that "*recording* an image would become inseparable from *producing* an image and would therefore lose the

reference to an external and unique referent."[36] Since there is a characteristic "*acti/passivity*"[37] at work in every photographic image, photography as a practice of image making is set in-between documenting and constructing reality: it is an ambiguous matter per se. Therefore, due to its potential of witnessing an event, it has to be regarded as double-edged as well. It refers to a past event, but it is not able to unravel its actual being. The evidential character of photography has to be deconstructed: There is no pure and unambiguous evidence. Derrida hints at the fact that even in a juridical setting an evidence is created in a complex process of "decompose, recompose, splice together, split apart, etc.,"[38] meaning that there is no coming to light of reality through evidence, but that the evidence brought forward triggers a multilayered act of (re-)constructing reality.

In an epistemological respect, this implies that reality cannot be conceived, but that it can be constructed from different perspectives and in various ways. What is intriguing about Derrida's deconstructivist[39] project is that it does not promote arbitrariness and boundless relativism. Although it is underlined that sense and with it our lived reality emerge eventfully according to the respective context of its production or reception, the deconstructivist gesture differentiates between more and less appropriate ways of constructing reality. For Derrida the construction of reality finally comes down to a reconstruction, as it cannot start from point zero. In terms of a deconstructive attitude, this reconstruction has to be in line with a critical engagement with the world. Therefore, it is not random. The willingness to respond to the situation given, the critical investigation of one's own position and attitude as well as the awareness of the existence of other perspectives are crucial features when it comes to a way of making sense that has an epistemological impact, i.e. that is actually revealing. With regard to not only epistemological, but also ethical matters authors inspired by Derrida, such as Judith Butler claim that the postmodern saying "*anything goes*" has to be double-checked. Especially when it comes to photographic images and their power to produce a convincing, sometimes even manipulative aspect of reality, the ethical responsibility of the image-maker, the image distributor as well as the spectator has to be addressed.[40]

Following Barthes and Derrida, from a theoretical perspective doing photography can be regarded as a praxis of image making that shows some typically postmodern characteristics.

1. It thematizes ambiguity. Creating a photographic image is understood as a paradoxical business, since a photograph refers to a past event and constructs a reality of its own at the same time. This is because the photograph is an index, physically dependent on the object photographed that has been imprinted on the light-sensitive surface.

2. It is characterized by an openness of meaning and a lack of transparency. As a sign, the photograph opens a void of meaning that has to be filled in afterwards, i.e. in the very moment and context of experiencing it. The photograph's reference to outer-pictorial reality is given and also, negotiated by those who regard it, with their individual interest, education, knowledge, attitude, and longings. Therefore, there can be no entirely transparent, objective or neutral image of the past. The meaning elicited by an image is open, since it is produced in the triad image-object depicted-spectator.

3. It is tautological and self-referential. In the case of photography, the image complicates the triad image-object depicted-spectator, since the photograph is tautological, meaning that the referent in the picture overlays the object photographed. Herein, the photograph refers to itself.

4. It oscillates between recording outer-pictorial reality and creating fiction. Photography is not anymore regarded as a documenting medium, but – just as painting, drawing or sculpting – as a constructive one.

5. Medium specificity is investigated and cross-media techniques are developed. The medium specificity of photography is underlined on the one hand, and questioned on the other. Since all images can be considered as signs, they are related in a way that transcends their difference.

Conclusion:

Towards Postmodern Image Making
As a Critical Engagement with the World

In summary, the characteristics of postmodern image making obtained by the theoretical reflection on doing photography address the ambiguity, openness, self-referentiality oscillating between documentation and fiction and the potential of transgressing media-specific boundaries of representation and expression. New ways of working with the respective media, alternative strategies of using techniques and unusual approaches to creating images open up alternative spaces for producing sense and meaning. However, if *"anything goes"* and the approaches to making and receiving images are simply pluralized these other ways run the risk of losing their impact and gravity. Reading authors, such as Barthes, Derrida, and Butler can help to conceive the thin line between deconstructing established ways of making sense and destructing the need to make sense at all. They hint at the importance of questioning normalized practices of image making in terms of their affirmative relationship to norms and the hegemonic power. Simultaneously they underline that our rapport with images and signs more generally is essential when it comes to our critical engagement with the world. Especially regarding the knowledge of reality and the responsibility we take for our actions we need to weigh the different ways of making and receiving images and not remain stuck in arbitrariness.

The theoretical outline of doing photography as a postmodern, but critical praxis of image making highlights a range of characteristics, but also serves to problematize some implications of a flat postmodern attitude.

Wall's practical approach and its manifestation in *Dead Troops Talk* emphasizes the potential, but also the dangers bound to a postmodern access. In terms of potential, it focuses on a nearly analytical undermining of photography's medium-specific limitation. The boundaries of the medium are dissolved, since the photographic work is set free to deliberately construct its own pictorial reality. It is not anymore doomed to record: it is constructive and creative. Still, it does not simply dismiss the documentary character. It addresses the recording aspect of photography as ambiguous, since in our visual culture it is often associated with producing an objective, neutral, non-constructed image of reality. The work underlines that this is not the case: Photography is a praxis of image making that oscillates between documentation and creation. Herein the belief in the objectivity

and transparency of the medium is rejected. At the same time, the power of photography to create images that actually matter for our conception of reality is approved: Wall's work not only questions the undoubted veritableness of traditional war photographs, it also seeks a new way of creating an image of war that is reflective in an epistemological and in an ethical respect. *Dead Troops Talk* exhibits the struggle to create an image that is able to represent the scandal of war without satisfying the spectator's curiosity and affirming our everyday rapport with the flood of pictures distributed on- and offline. What this image tells about war does matter. And it also matters what it has to say about ethically adequate approaches to show catastrophic events.

Along these lines, the practical and the theoretical reflections allow for a characterization of postmodern image making that depicts serious aesthetic, but also epistemological and ethical concerns. Postmodern image making problematizes dualistic setups, such as original vs. copy or reality vs. fiction. It aims to creating works that walk a fine line between referring to and developing a new approach, between recording, processing, and creating. Critically engaging with the world of the past, the present and the future, it works with strategies of destruction, construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction. Herein, it promotes pluralism, but does not put the case for arbitrariness and boundless relativism. A critical postmodern gesture underlines the need to question established categories of order, strategies of representation and sense production. It does so, however, whilst being aware of the dangers that accompany such a rejection. Herein, it is careful about trying and pondering not only the aesthetic, but also the epistemological and ethical gravity of alternative perspectives.

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Notes

[1] This article was written as part of the research project "Aesthetic Practice and the Critical Faculty" (T 835) funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).

[2] Accordingly, thinkers like Dick Hebdige underline that "postmodern" is a mere buzzword. Dick Hebdige, "Postmodernism and 'the other side'," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A reader*, ed. John Storey (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006), 410-424.

[3] See e.g. Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 2005); Hal Foster, Postmodern Culture (London: Pluto Press, 1985); Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

[4] See e.g. Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," Arts 54, No.6 (February 1980); Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[5] See e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Malden: Blackwell, 1993; Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989); Stephen Tyler, *The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

[6] See Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997); Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Postmodernism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1998), ed. Edward Craig, https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/postmodernism/v-1 (access date: June 22, 2020); Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/ (access date: June 22, 2020); Brian Duignan, "Postmodernism," in Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019), https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy (access date: June 22, 2020).

[7] In this respect, a very influential figure for Western modern thought is René Descartes. See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

[8] See Nigel Wheale (ed.), *The Postmodern Arts: An introductory reader* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[9] Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Turn*, 133.

[10] For an influential conception of the artist as genius see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), § 49.

[11] For a discussion of the role of collage in postmodern art see Thomas Brockelman, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

[12] For an exposition of the use of bricolage in postmodern filmmaking see John Bruns, "Refiguring Pleasure: Itami and the Postmodern Japanese Film," in *Postmodernism in the Cinema*, ed. Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998), 93-112.

[13] For a general elaboration on appropriative techniques in postmodern art see Amanda Fink, *Postmodern Artists: Creators of a Cultural Movement* (New York: Lucent Press, 2019); for an account that reflects upon postmodern appropriation art and its implications see Julie C. van Camp, "Originality in Postmodern Appropriation Art," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society,* volume 36 (2007), 247-258.

[14] For an overview of postmodern artistic approaches see Stephen Melville, "Postmodernism and art: Postmodernism now and again," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism,* ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 82-96.

[15] Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993), 19.

[16]" "Lamenting the 'loss of meaning' in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative." Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1984), 26.

[17] Especially Lyotard shows a lot of interest in art and culture, as his text "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" shows. See Lyotard, Condition, 71-84.

[18] As one of the most famous critics, Jürgen Habermas problematizes the conceptual foundation of postmodernism and, herein, its dottiness in an epistemological respect. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of* Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[19] For a critical investigation of the challenges that come along with a postmodern approach in ethics see Dan Gordon, "Ethics, Reason and Emotion," in *Criticism and Defense of Rationality in Contemporary Philosophy,* ed. Dan Gordon and Jozef Niznik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 55-68.

[20] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

[21] Roger Scruton not only attacks the epistemological, political and moral implications of postmodernism, but also the aesthetic ones. See Roger Scruton, "High culture is being corrupted by a culture of fakes," *The Guardian* (19.12.2012), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/19/high-culture-fake (access date: 22.6.2020).

[22] For further information on Jeff Wall's work see Jeff Wall and Els Barent, *Jeff Wall: Transparencies: With an Interview* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Rolf Lauter, "Jeff Wall: Figures and Places," in *Jeff Wall Figures and Places: Selected Works 7978-2000,* ed. Rolf Lauter (New York: MfMK Frankfurt/Main and Prestel, 2001), 13-125; Donald Kuspit, "Looking up at Jeff Wall's Modern 'Appasionamento'," Artforum (Mar. 1982), 52-56; Sharla Sava, "Cinematic Pictures: The Legacy of the Vancouver Counter-Tradition," Vancouver Art & Economies (2007), 47-67.

[23] Within the theory of photography, objectivity is a central category. There are several approaches, which underline that photographic images are characterized by objectivity and transparency. See Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation," *Critical Inquiry 7* (1981), 577-603; Scott Walden, "Objectivity in Photography," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005), 258-272; Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures. On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984), 246-277.

[24] Rosalind Krauss is one of the most popular art critics who elaborates on the dealing with media-specificity in postmodern art. See Krauss, *A Voyage or Rosalind Krauss, The Originality of the Avantgarde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

[25] For a discussion of the ways photography participates in shaping reality see Leslie Mullen, *Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Postmodern World* (State University System of Florida, 1998); also Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introdu*ction (London: Routledge, 1996).

[26] Barthes chooses the term "photographic referent" in order to describe the object photographed: "I call 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.

[27] For a classical semiotic conception of the index see Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers: 2. Elements of Logic* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998), 281ff.

[28] Rosalind Krauss takes up Peirce's definition, noting that indices bear a "physical relationship to their referents" Krauss, Originality, 198. Accordingly, they refer, but are not necessarily like their referents. The lack of similarity can come along with a lack of meaning. Krauss therefore considers the index as a sign without code, cut out of a worldly context of established meanings: "Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface [...] [and thus] bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seem to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representation of most paintings." Ibid. 203.

[29] Roland Barthes, *Image Music* Text (London: Fontana, 1977), 44.

[30] Barthes, *Camera*, 5.

[31] Some authors in the wider field of postmodern thinking who take interest in photography are Kaja Silverman, Rosalind Krauss, Judith Butler and Susan Sontag.

[32] See Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31-68.

[33] See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

[34] See Jacques Derrida, *Margins in Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).

[35] Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature; A Conversation on Photography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

[36] Ibid., 5.

[37] Ibid., 12.

[38] Ibid., 45.

[39] For Derrida's understanding of deconstructivism see Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[40] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009). With regard to Jeff Wall Susan Sontag's view upon the ethical responsibility when it comes to war photography is of special interest: Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Picador, 2003).

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What is Reality?

Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and the artist Karin Kneffel on the deconstruction of the familiar as liberation from determination

Martina Sauer

"I want spaces and times, present and past to merge in my paintings.
What is reality, what is fiction, where does pictorial reality begin?"
Karin Kneffel. (Voss 2019, 91, trans. by the author)

Abstract

What is reality? It is postmodern or poststructuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes, who realized that it only seems that the media present reality in the form of facts, because they actually spread myths. Accordingly, Jacques Derrida made it clear that communication via media is not based on logic, but is characterized by a significant "différance" between a "marque" (trace) of the past and the expectations of the future. Both agreed, that the initial misunderstanding of the concept of reality must be uncovered or "deconstructed". This is more than necessary for them, because media, be it pictures or language, in truth convey values that are culturally and socially significant. They 'iterate' these values subliminally, because what shows up are only placeholders and thus mere forms ("structures of graphematic") that are superficially realised as facts ("stereotypes"). In this way, according to Barthes, we all accept without question the values hidden behind them, so that they can gain a normative power that unconsciously guides our thinking, our decisions and our actions. Afterwards, it is Judith Butler who critically asked: How can we ever escape from this? Given the power of the subliminal dominant discourses, she saw the only effective solution "im Umdeuten" (in reinterpretation) of their subliminal values. In order to finally escape this "parasitic existence at the ritual", the media philosopher Walter Benjamin already suggested to trigger "Chockwirkungen" (shock effects) in the viewer. It is the German painter Karin Kneffel, so it shall be shown, who has realized this with her series Fruits and Interiors in the most beautiful photorealistic strategy.

A descriptive introduction: Karin Kneffel's series of *Fruits* and the deconstruction of the familiar

What about Karin Kneffel's series of Fruits, with which the artist first attracted attention on the art scene at the end of the 1990s? (Fig. 1-3) Why is it so irritating? This impression, which only arises at second glance, is in clear contradiction to the artist's works, which at first glance appear photorealistically correct and can be described as beautiful in the classical sense. The perfection of these classical paintings in oil on canvas was created in many long hours, preferably night after night, with a very narrow brush in several layers on top of each other and partly in clearly larger-than-life formats of up to 7.10 by 4.20 meters, which usually hang high above the viewer. (Cf. cataloque, Kneffel 2019; texts in cataloque and press cf. Kneffel 2020, cf. summarizing Wedewer 2008, cf. style of painting Voss 2019, 91-94)

So, what is so irritating about the extremely precisely painted Fruits? Looking closer on the peaches (fig. 1), it quickly becomes clear that the trigger for this lies in the overexcitation of our senses. So, we are struck by the strong perceivable velvety soft material quality of them with their flawless surfaces, and thus they suddenly appear too intensive. In addition, the branches on which they hang are confusing; on closer inspection, their smooth surfaces make them look artificial rather than natural. This last effect is supported by the rich shade of blue in the background, which shimmers lighter and darker in places that also contrasts brightly with the orange tones of the fruits. This is irritating, too.

The numerous variations of grapes, apples, cherries and plums from this series repeat and confirm this impression. In addition, these deviations are reinforced by the fact that they all have no connection to everyday life. Thus, the grapes in figure 2 seem to float as isolated fruiting bodies in front of a flat brown ground, independent of the space and time of the observer, or, in contrast, as in figure 3, they spread out on the surface without any background. The latter are thus lost in the composition of a so-called ´allover´. Nevertheless, even without any reference to the here and now, their impressive presence as realistic, apparently tangible, beautiful fruit is preserved in both variations. In addition, especially in the last picture, the colourful, densely packed grapes seem so artificial that we begin to have doubts. Are they perhaps just colourful balloons hanging next to each other? To the question of what is real here, only one answer seems possible: everything – and then another equally unequivocal answer follows: nothing. This confuses. What is wrong here and why? What is really at stake here?
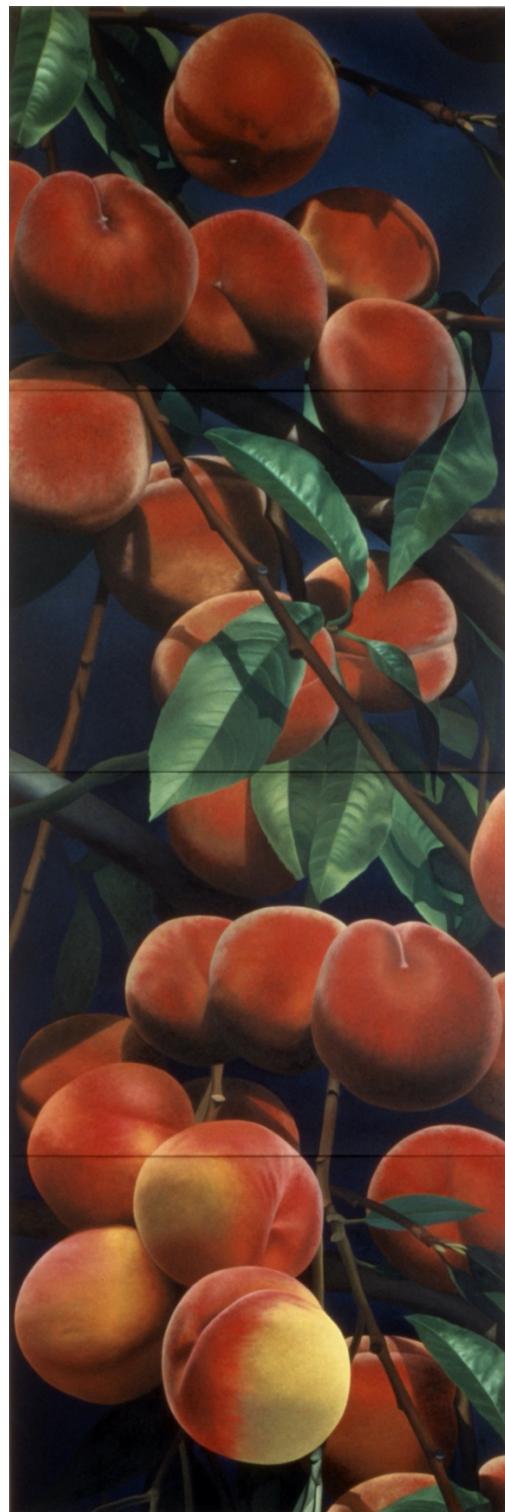
Figure 1. untitled (peaches,) 1996, four-part,
oil on canvas, 7,10 x 2,40m, KfW Stiftung Frankfurt a.M.

Figure 2. untitled (grapes), 1998, oil on canvas, 3,00 x 2,00 m,
DZ Bank, Kunstsammlung Düsseldorf
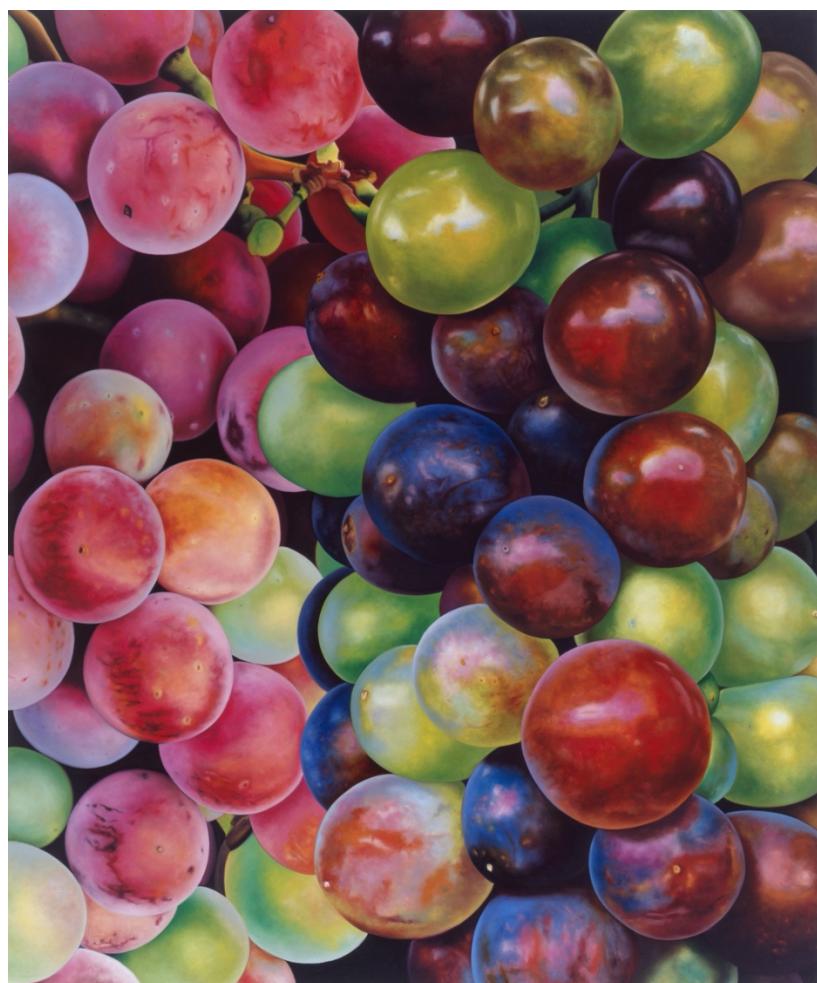
Figure 3. untitled (grapes), 2004, oil on canvas,
2,40 x 2,00 m, Museum Frieder Burda Baden-Baden

What is Reality?
Answers of postmodern philosophy

Summarizing, it is precisely by overemphasizing space, surfaces and bodies in these spatially or flatly organized large-sized compositions and by using bright colours, that Karin Kneffel disconnects her motifs form the real time and the real space of the viewer. Instead, the feeling of closeness is massively intensified, the motifs seem to jump into our faces. This procedure makes it clear that although the motifs are realistic, their being is roughly separated from our everyday life by the artist´s artistic strategies. It is noteworthy that exactly this very subject of Karin Kneffel was in the focus of postmodernity in the 80s and 90s. In addition, Karin Kneffel studied philosophy and German studies herself at the beginning of her career, then switched to fine arts and in the 90s and later became a master student of Gerhard Richter in Düsseldorf. She therefore knows the philosophical questions of postmodernism, as she personally confirmed in an interview on October 10, 2019. All the more reason to ask the question: what is at stake when Kneffel´s artefacts question our daily life and thus "deconstruct" it, as Jacques Derrida introduced as a method? Why does this seem important and what does it mean?

Answers to these questions are to be provided by discussing central positions of postmodern or poststructuralist philosophers, who are so called because of their research on the structures and media conditions of society. The positions of Roland Barthes' and Jacques Derrida´s are interesting in terms of content, those of Judith Butler because of their method. In the transition of the two, the approach of their predecessor Walter Benjamin proves to be revealing. In view of these approaches, the question is to become clearer as to what Karin Kneffel´s work is about. This is to be carried out by means of comparative analysis. Two series are to be examined more closely, the Fruits of the late 90s and the Interiors (self-chosen title) since 2009, both of which, like all her series, are still in development today.

Roland Barthes, "Mythologies" (1957)

Roland Barthes is one of the first to make a significant contribution to the study of postmodern age, 'avant la lettre'. (Cf. re. cultural studies, Grabbe, Rupert-Kruse 2009, 21-31) In his key book *Mythologies* form 1957, he spoke of facts, which precisely characterizes the everyday understanding of media, be it words or pictures, without us recognizing their subliminal meaning. (Cf. re. images, Jöckel 2018, 255-273) The Fruits of Karin Kneffel are a good example of this. Influenced by our everyday experiences, they too give us credible impressions of fruits that look exactly the way we think they should look, be it peaches, grapes, apples, plums or cherries. But Roland Barthes abandoned this idea by showing that what we see is never factual or neutral, but "mythologies". One of the best-known examples, with which he also presented his theoretical considerations on the subject, is the cover of the magazine *Paris Match* from June 1955 of a young black man in uniform saluting with a militarily greeting.

Figure 4. Cover, *Paris Match*, No. 326, 25th-26th June 1955
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mythologies_(book),
use Rationale for Roland Barthes "Mythologies", 1957

The underlying meaning of the motif seems obvious, it is about French sons who are loyal soldiers of the French Empire, 'la Grande Nation', regardless of their skin colour. The story behind this motif is rich, "it postulates a knowledge, a past, a memory, an ordered compilation of facts, ideas and decisions." (Barthes 2013 [1957] 262-267, cf. 262, transl. M.S.) Yet this richness and depth of meaning are lost at the moment it is presented on the cover of Paris Match, Barthes said. The meaning impoverished and lives on only as a stereotype. The inner meaning is still there, but the simplified composition can no longer represent it. The image is only a shell of it. It functions as a placeholder. In this respect, it is only a form that can speak of something completely different because of its openness. Hence, a new hidden meaning can emerge, said Barthes, which can take on the power of a truly great and long living mythology. In this way, a new meaning arises, based on the old one, namely that of an imperialist state. (269) The reduction of a previously valid, rich and varied meaning can be erased by simplifying it to a *mere* form, and thus creating space for a new powerful myth. The black soldier only serves as an alibi for this new myth: you see, we belong together, but we are still the masters, the image says. The French bourgeoisie, according to Barthes, has understood the message. For it represents their values and nourishes their natural self-image. That is the true intention and thus the purpose of the poster. It is intended to iterate the values and thus strengthen and consolidate them without being consciously perceived. As for the method, this is achieved through a simple process. An earlier rich motif is used and reduced to an empty slide or form for a new message. In this way the own values of the own imperial power can grow richly behind it.

In summary, Barthes noted that the myth plays with the analogy between meaning and form. It was therefore clear to him: "No myth without a motivated form." (Cf. 273, and see also, 288-294, trans. M.S.) It is remarkable that the new meaning is based on the old one, which gives the message the impression of a fact. The myth thus appears natural and rooted. This process is a form of "naturalization". (278-280) Instead of making obvious that the new message has an intention or purpose, it is hidden behind facts. Therefore, the message appears to be pure and innocent. This made it obvious to him, instead a value system, the picture belongs to a fact system. (270-271) The intention turns into something eternal that belongs to the natural order of facts. The innocence ahead, the black man is presented as a part of it. But reality is not like that, said Barthes, quoting Karl Marx: "Everything keeps its trace and thus its history, and thus the more or less imprinted presence of the human action, which is produced, used, subjected to or rejected." (249-316, cf. 296, and see also Marx 1969, 43, transl. M.S.)

It is this "naturalization" that Karin Kneffel takes up in her oeuvre. So, peaches or grapes are presented in the way we imagine them. They look according to our stereotypical image of them; their bodies are dimensioned and their surfaces "feel" that way. The fruits confirm our image of them in every respect: they are absolutely perfect and beautiful. The trace that Kneffel follows is that of an idealization that in reality does not match a real peach or grape as they naturally have discolorations or rotten spots.[1] As Barthes noted, (any) reality depends on variety, on different phenomena, states and conditions. The appearance of the fruits depends on the type, the places where it is grown and stored, the markets where it is sold and bought, and the conditions under which it is kept at home, as well as its ripeness and age, etc. So, when Karin Kneffel irritates us with her all too perfect and beautiful pictures of fruit, she takes us too far. We stop and start thinking. Using the artistic means of exaggerated idealization while at the same time omitting the real variety of fruits, Karin Kneffel makes us think about the ideal images we carry within us. After all, it is this ideal image that influences our decisions and our actions. In the shop and at the market we search for and buy the ideal, perfect peach or apple which can only be cultivated optimally and/or genetically manipulated to match.

Jacques Derrida, "Marque" (1968)

With regard to the history of postmodern or poststructuralist philosophy, it is Jacques Derrida for whom the term "marque" (trace) become central. What is said with this term corresponds to what Barthes already emphasized in reference to Marx. Thus, according to Derrida, what shows up to us carries the "marque" (trace) of the past and, in this respect, always intervenes in the future. It is part of the present and yet divorced from it. In conclusion, that what shows up is not real. (Derrida 1968, 17-19) He first presented this idea in 1968 in a lecture in Paris. It was influenced by the philosophy of Heidegger, Husserl, Nietzsche and Freud. Behind this philosophical background, it is the distinction between memory ("Retentionen", just-past) and expectations ("Protentionen", just-future) invented by Husserl that influenced Derrida. Moreover, it was Heidegger who showed Derrida that this distinction opens the discourse on the meaning of being or reality, which Heidegger discussed in 1927 in *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. (Cf. 12-16, 20-34, see also on the connection of Husserl and Derrida, Gallagher 1992, 21-30, and Laner 2013, 129-138) Reality, Derrida concluded, thus can only be conceived as a "marque" (trace) of the before and the after. Derrida differentiated remotely that the ´meaning of the real´ that comes up with the "marque" (trace) is spatial through its emergence in the here and now and at the same time it is temporal through that what is actively penetrated by it. (13-19) In this respect, what shows up, is both passively suffered and actively processed. Jacques Derrida grasped this phenomenon as "différance", which in this case is written with an 'a' instead of 'e' in order to make clear the deviation from the French word 'différence'. That is important for him in order to clarify his both un-sensual and unintelligible character. (6-10)

What emerges is to be understood as an "iteration" as he described it in a lecture in Montreal in August 1971. Specifically, it is a meaning from the past, that is iterated and has the purpose "to secure the authority and power of a particular historical discourse." (Derrida 1976 [1971], 132-137, cf. 132, transl. M.S.) This statement by Derrida shows once again that these "marques" (traces) are not facts, but (socially and culturally significant) values, and they can be passed on in the writing and so it can be supplemented here in the image or all media. In this assumption he obviously meets Barthes´ definition of mythologies, because the ´mythologies´ are nothing else than values conveyed through images or media of all kinds. (Cf. concurring Sauer 2018 [2012]) In continuation of this connection

Derrida assumed that all communication via media only ever takes place in new and fragile contexts. In this respect, he saw it as a "performative statement". (Derrida 1971, 138-142) With the latter he took up a term from John Austin's speech act theory and at the same time differed from it by not understanding the performative utterance as one that succeeds ("illocution") or perhaps fails ("perlocution") and thus comes up from a determinable situation ("locution"), but grasped it as one that constantly moves in new contexts. (142-149, 153, cf. Austin 2018 [1962/1975]) This passing on of the statements is possible –and this is important– because that what they refer to is always absent. This connection is crucial for a better understanding of Kneffel's work. For even in her picture, for example of peaches (fig. 1), but also of grapes, apples, plums and cherries, the fruits are –unmistakably and thus actually– not really present. Their presence can only be seen with Derrida as a "marque" (trace). There is always a "dfférance". All communication, therefore, according to Derrida, has only a "graphematic" structure. It is only formal or form. In it, Derrida meets again with Barthes, who came to the same conclusion. (Derrida 1976 [1971], 137, 143, 151, see Barthes 2013 [1957], 262-267).

In summary, this means that against the background of the two approaches of postmodern thinkers, the peaches and all the other fruits that Kneffel paints, through their respective ´form´ only convey an image (an idea) of themselves as extremely perfect. With simplification or stereotyping, a kind of "deformation", the artist naturalizes the fruits with Barthes and presents them as self-evident facts. At the same time, this strategy allows to convey a new meaning: that of the ideal, normative beauty of fruit. Nevertheless, with Derrida it comes up, that these pictures already disclose the "différance" because they are just too perfect. This is exactly what triggers our irritation, as I described at the beginning.

Walter Benjamin, "Chockwirkungen" (1936)

In this context, and looking back on the history of philosophy, Walter Benjamin's remarks on the function and effects of the media in his well-known essay of 1936 on *Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* take on a new meaning. (Benjamin 1977 [1936], 7-44) This is because Benjamin recognized, as I explained elsewhere and as Barthes and Derrida later confirmed, that we are not free in our dealing with the media. (Cf. Sauer 2010) According to Benjamin, we surrender ourselves entirely to their immediate effect on us and tend to consider what they show us to be true (keyword "Aura", cf. Benjamin 1977 [1936], 16-22). In this way, we do not distance ourselves from them, but move in the constant stream of values that they convey to us without being aware of them. It is against this background that Benjamin's strong demand to get rid of them can be explained. He said that this is urgently necessary to "liquidate the traditional value of cultural heritage" (14, trans. M.S.) in order to ultimately renounce the values that are passed on through them. According to him, this will only be successful, if we free ourselves form the „parasitic existence at the ritual" (17, transl. M.S.). But how? Benjamin himself hoped that the new media, in his time the film and the "Chockwirkungen" or shock effects that they have on us, could make this possible. Subsequent media theories proved, however, that the new media also do not allow us to distance ourselves from the values that are subliminally conveyed. (Sauer 2010, § 3-4)

With regard to Kneffel's works, however, it should be emphasized that they do not trigger any radical "Chockwirkungen" (shock effects). However, they irritate us enough to cause us to stop and think about what the artist is really showing us here. Finally, in the light of postmodern philosophy, it becomes clear that by presenting the Fruits in a simplified or stereotypical form and at the same time emphasizing their perfection, their normative power comes to the fore. In each version, the familiar subliminal message is conveyed and confirmed. It reads: peaches, grapes or apples should look exactly like this: perfect and beautiful. At the same time, the artist contradicts the message by irritating the viewer, telling him that this way of representation the norm almost inevitably excludes any variety and deviation from it.

Judith Butler, "Umdeuten" (1993)

It is this compulsiveness of the ´performative´ –and this refers to the form of simplification or ´stereotyping´ with which things show themselves to us, namely as natural and factually imagined contexts– that Judith Butler dealt with in her philosophical approach. Can we ever escape the normative power of what is communicated through media, and how? Do we not depend at the mercy of the reiteration of facts as facts and the obviousness and certainty with which we grasp them? Can we actually still be ourselves, if we only deal with facts that are not facts but "myths" and "marques" (traces), as Barthes and Derrida have already made clear, and are thus values permeated and proven by the dominant cultures, which automatically become the norm for us and thus the guideline for our actions? Do we always iterate only what has always been valid? In view of this finding, which Judith Butler uncovered with precise sharpness, can we still act independently? What possibilities do we actually have? The result of her research on this was that this can only be possible through "Umdeuten" (a reinterpretation) of the discourse that the alleged facts present to us. (Butler 1993, 128-129) A prerequisite for this is that we, as possible actors, become aware of the normative power of facts or the discourses hidden behind them and actively work on their reinterpretation. The "'instance' of action" lies precisely therein. (124-125, here 124) Without it we inscribe ourselves into the normative power of the discourses of 'facts', submit to them and iterate them continuously. We cannot then free ourselves from it. For Butler, this concern gains importance above all in social interaction, since the power of facts, for instance, ascribes to women their roles in society, and the (hidden) values lying within them are constantly iterated by themselves and by others, so that change is difficult or impossible. Only by actively reinterpreting existing discourses can we become capable of acting independently, she argued in the 90s in a lively exchange with leading women researchers in gender theory. [2]

With regard to the arts, the question arises of how we can escape the normative power of the facts that are constantly expressed in them? Karin Kneffel has already found an answer to this question in her series of Fruits, in which she creates perfect, beautiful fears deliberately idealization of peaches, grapes, apples, etc., which represent the power of reality we do not doubt, and in this respect, in fact, submit to its normative power. Our everyday buying behaviour is a mirror of this. The breeders and farmers conscientiously fulfil this wish. It is only with difficulty, with prolonged looking and finally by repeating the impression of the perfect pictures of the fruits against a neutral background that we are alienated. Something is

wrong. Karin Kneffel applies an artistic strategy here that Walter Benjamin just called "Chockwirkungen" (shock effects). Even more clearly than in the series of Fruits, such effects can be seen in the artist's more recent works, in which the deviations from reality (the "différance") are much more obvious, as can be shown.

One of these series, which I call Interiors, in which these deviations become irritatingly clear, is the work on *Haus Lange* and *Haus Ester* in Krefeld, which she began realizing in 2009 (fig. 4 -6). These are pictures in which Kneffel dealt with two neighbouring city villas built between 1928 and 1930 by Mies van der Rohe, who became in 1930 the last director of the Bauhaus in Berlin. Her interest in reproducing the interiors of these buildings as faithfully as possible in her paintings prompted her to conduct intensive research. (Cf. Voss 2019, 85-94) Original black-and-white photographs from the archives, interviews with the descendants and the collection of information about the Bauhaus and Mies van der Rohe in particular served this purpose. In addition, she worked intensively on the inventory, which included not only the furniture, which still appears just as modern today, but also the important collection of Expressionist art, especially at *Haus Lange*, whose presentation as a circulating system was realised by Lilly Reich, the partner of Mies van der Rohe (fig. 4-5). Among them were e.g. the art of August Macke, Renée Sintenis, Oskar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Wilhelm v. Lehmbruck, Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall, which at that time belonged to the avant-garde.

Kneffel's desire to reproduce everything as plausible and ´authentic´ as possible, as it looked, inspired her to examine, especially with regard to the latter, who owns the works today and where they hang (fig. 7). (Voss 2019, 86) In this way, she can give a faithful picture of their appearance. With regard to Kneffel's realized Interiors, they seem to fulfil this claim so authentically, which they in turn do not.


Figure 5. untitled (Haus Lange, Krefeld, living room), 2009,
four-part, oil on canvas, 1,80 x 5,20 m, Collection Heinz und Marianne Ebers-Stiftung.

Figure 6. untitled (Haus Lange, Krefeld, dining room), 2017/5,
oil on canvas, 1,80 x 2,40 m, private collection.

Figure 7. untitled (Marc Chagall, The Holy Coachman, 1911, Städel Museum Frankfurt
a.M.), 2017/6, oil on canvas, 1,80 x 2,40 m, private collection.

For standing in front of them, these works always show us only those details in colour and clearly, of which she can tell exactly what they looked like; everything else blurs in brownish-grey tones, as the archive photographs show. This also applies, first of all, to the masterpieces of the visual arts (fig. 5). It is only in later versions that she reproduced them in colour, and this at the moment when, after thorough research, she knew with certainty their original colouring (fig. 6-7). Thus, even deviations in the hanging of Marc Chagall´s *The Holy Coachman* in Haus Lange and in the museum in Frankfurt's Städel were addressed in other works in the series (fig. 6-7). It is, after all, other details that cause lasting irritation. For both the red tulips and the sliced yellow shining lemons certainly do not belong to the original inventory. These irritations are intensified by further interventions, as the artist erects a transparent barrier directly in front of us. In the one case there seem to be drops on a window (fig. 5), in the other case reflections on blinds (fig. 6-7). Through them the light shines into the rooms and refracts itself accordingly in colour. As multiple refracted reflections the light is reflected at least in honey-coloured drops on the window pane, but also on the walls (fig. 5) as well as in the blinds and in the coloured round balloon-like reflections in the room (fig. 6-7). (Cf. also Voss 2019, 90-91)

These last aspects listed here speak of a completely different, divergent understanding. With them, it takes up less historically verifiable aspects than those that suggest subsequent events. This already includes the correction of the colouring of the hung works of art. Furthermore, she apparently also understands as important events that took place much later. In addition to the lemons, these include above all, the tulips that also appear in other series of the artist, and which she apparently added to when she was working on them herself. They are, so to speak, relics from 2009 and 2017 in the two Interiors discussed (fig. 5-6). This pattern of including later 'events' or aspects, also seems to apply to the windows and blinds. With them she indirectly involves us as current viewers. For we are the ones who stand behind the window pane and in front of the blinds, through which the light falls and brightens the rooms accordingly. To assume with reference to these pictures that they reconstruct an authentic picture of the situation from the years 1928-1930 proves to be wrong. The meticulous research, it turns out, always refers anew to the respective time in which an encounter took place. Accordingly, the artist's own additions from 2009 and 2017, and finally those in which we ourselves look into the rooms as through a window, change the respective view. Their 'historical' being changes continuously with each new insight and yet remains as a 'marque'. The 'reality' of view is not fixed, it is in constant change by each of us in every moment.

Conclusion
'Anything Goes' As a Liberation From Determination

In the 'most beautiful' sense, provoked by the work of Karin Kneffel and inspired by the basic ideas of the philosophy of postmodernism or poststructuralism, one can say with Barthes that it is 'myths of everyday' to assume we ever see reality. This reality has always been changed or 'deformed' by reducing its meaning to simple facts or 'stereotypes', as we remember them or as we find them on a photograph in an archive. What we see, Kneffel shows, ´seem´ to be only facts, because 'in truth' we constantly enrich them with new meaning, so that the old one changes. This ever new sense cannot be neutral. In this respect the artist's favourite flowers, the tulips, change the view of the alleged interior according to her own taste. Later, we ourselves –through the barrier between us and the interior– are called upon to get involved in the process, for example, to recognize how much the style of the furniture from the Bauhaus period is still relevant today, and if not with me, then with friends and acquaintances. What we see has its own complex past that has something to do with us. We keep seeing this close bond with it, said Derrida. Her "marque" (trace) holds on to what we see and shapes our expectations and our actions. In this way, the meaning in the picture is constantly enriched anew by others, here by the artist, but also by ourselves. It is constantly changing and affects the future. We will not find reality as such, as Kneffel shows us with her work. And yet we all firmly believe that is reality. Then what is reality?

Thus, despite or perhaps because of Karin Kneffel's meticulous research –a convincing form of artistic research– it was and is not possible to uncover this reality, but only to show "marques" (traces) of it. With the help of "Chockwirkungen" (shock effects), Kneffel shows us the "différance" with which she simultaneously refers to the 'myths of everyday' that we are constantly confronted with. This strategy makes it possible for her to uncover and thus deconstruct this apparent nature of the 'facts'. It is a form of "Umdeuten" (reinterpreting) and thus a new occupation, as Butler suggested as a method. The new sense that frees itself from the hegemony of the traditional and allows new versions and perspectives then emerges. The changed perspectives that these ever show us redeem us from the supposed facts. The reward for this is –instead of an apparently objective truth, for example about what is beautiful– richness and diversity, whose roots lie in ourselves: "Everything can be beautiful", Karin Kneffel said in the end of the conversation in October 10, 2019.

The accusation of 'anything goes', i.e. of arbitrariness, which is recognizable in Kneffel's statement, and which has been and still is just as often reproached of postmodernism, must finally be countered in principle: the greater danger lies fundamentally in the normative. For it calls upon all those who are bound to it to measure all things or even people by it, who as a rule only rarely meet the norm. Beauty, thus understood as a norm, can then exert considerable pressure on each individual. The peach or apple must look like this, otherwise it won't sell, or else I don't want it. Producer and buyer are under pressure caused by the standards. Standards turn out to be determinations. Applied to us away from things, the postulate of beauty has a similarly restrictive effect. The cult of ideal proportions of body and face puts women and men equally under pressure. Allowing variety and richness is one form of response to this, but it takes a lot of strength to resist the pressure of the norm. Another, less passive, lies in actively reinterpreting Kneffel's handling of the 'historical' Interiors speak of this. In an uncomplicated and playful way, they change the image of history, show its relativity and thus take away its ´given´ certainty, which proves to be liberating.

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Notes

[1] In a conversation on October 10, 2019 Karin Kneffel confirmed this assumption by saying that she once painted rotten spots in fruit and that others had concluded that her artistic goal was to symbolize Vanitas or the transience of life. That means that she with her work shows us the cycle of life in which we grow like fruits, reach our climax and then die. But that, Kneffel concluded, was not her goal. Since then, she has refrained from painting rotten spots in fruit.

[2] This remarkable and renowned discussion between Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser was edited and first published in German In *Der Streit um Differenz. Feminismus der Postmoderne in der Gegenwart.* Fischer: Frankfurt a. M. 1993 and later translated into English: Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange, Thinking Gender, (Routledge: Abingdon 1995).

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Texts in cataloques and press: Homepage Karin Kneffel: http://www.kneffel.de/kneffel/texte/

The Postmodern Avatar[1]
The Changing World of the Arts and Jeff Koons

Christiane Wagner

Abstract

In their own historical and social essence, the arts comprise moments of rupture or overcoming concerning their purposes. In this article, it is essential to consider the cultural changes in the passage from the 20th to the 21st century. This article seeks to understand this moment as a process of development relating not only to the arts in its milieu of experts, but also the arts in its meaning for audiences in urban centers. These transformations are the main characteristics of urban visual culture, representations of the world view by both characteristics and needs, varying according to political and social cultures. Historical analysis and reflection on the meaning of art in the contemporary world seek to contextualize the purpose of this visual culture in this moment of transition. The ideologies that guided modern art no longer offer their meanings. However, to illustrate the subject of this transition context, the art of Jeff Koons is analyzed for its impact and cultural receptivity, with emphasis on the ongoing dichotomous relationship of our history that breaks with the conservative tradition, which has significant representatives in the Château de Versailles—a symbol of power, not only for a French monarchical tradition but, above all, for the reasons that led to the French Revolution (1789–1799), an advent that transformed Western societies. However, there could be no better scenario to represent a revolution in the arts through contemporary art exhibitions. To understand this recent moment of rupturing, especially with the modern arts—called the postmodern age—this article discusses whether modernity's values are surpassed, and which artistic and cultural values prevail in the contemporary. Thus, a fundamental motive in the arts' universe, with origins in the Renaissance, stands out as an argument for the aesthetic judgment and taste that prevails in the entire cultural sphere reigning absolute—the kitsch. Finally, facing the technical, artistic, and cultural possibilities, such as the stages of different social reality processes, the Kitsch Art or postmodern sculptures of Jeff Koons are placed in the current socio-cultural context.

The Postmodern Sculptures
and Architecture as Symbol of Power

The Château de Versailles' architectural spaces are not only part of a historical moment; they are a means of transformative cultural reality: a symbolic socio-political space of both tradition and uprising—the French Monarchy and Revolution—as the representativeness for the artistic legacy. This relationship of symbolic spaces and humanity's heritages represents the cultural tradition and, above all, the glorification of both royalty and the republic's power in its apparent conformities or rejection. Therefore, contemporary art's transformative effect in architectural space is a means for its realization also perceived as a cultural reality. All issues are part of the cultures concerning the past, present, and future. Thus, the real-world dimension of performance and space concerning historical signs results from cultural and social traditions and transformations. During the 20th century, many researchers studied the consequences of such important and necessary change over time in the technical cultures, policies, and materials of everyday life.

Presently, all contemporary values are searching in their configurations for the image that could characterize their values. The question is as follows: What is real or illusion in each of these realizations in their time and social reality? Concerning the contrast of many realizations that coexist with previous eras' artistic works, the analysis is much more complicated when it comes to urban space in the relationship of tradition with new ways of perceiving the symbolic universe through its artifacts, which represents its values. The discussion of the ancient versus the modern is a constant in art history. At each new exhibition, a new image is speculated under the antagonism between the old and the new. Tradition and progress are nothing more than mere images of appearance, especially in contemporary art related to the cultural market, as explains professor Jimenez (2010) in the *Le Monde,* "Vive l'insolence et l'insolite contre puritains et puristes!" (Hurray for insolence and the insolent against puritans and purists!): "Contemporary art, a postmodern avatar, does not enter into the game of simple duality between past and future. It is the presence of a third dimension, that of generalized métissage, of the extent—and no longer the temporality—of this 'spectacle' defined, more than forty years ago, by Guy Debord, as the 'moment when commercialization has reached the total occupation of social life.'"[2]

Figure 1. Jeff Koons, *Balloon Flower, Celebration* series (1995-1999).
Photo by Marc Wathieu. Chateau de Versailles. November 21, 2008.
Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

This reference is part of an article on an exhibition at the Château de Versailles that was as controversial as that of Jeff Koons. It belonged to the artist Takashi Murakami, one of the stars of Japanese contemporary art. During Murakami's exhibition, the Parisian newspaper *Le Monde* published the essay (October 1, 2010) on this subject by Marc Jimenez, a philosopher specializing in aesthetics, professor at the University of Paris I (Panthéon-Sorbonne), and author of *La Querelle de l'art contemporain* (2005). Concerning the work in question, it is an important work highlighting the meaning of contemporary art by its magnitude. Finally, the Château de Versailles (France) also received works by Jeff Koons[3] in the Palace (October 9, 2008 – April 1, 2009), composing the scene by contrasting what most characterizes the French Baroque with architectural forms of classicism by the exceptional grandeur of the Château de Versailles, which is classified as a historical monument by UNESCO (Fig. 1).

Therefore, it is necessary to consider from the aesthetic perspective what can be understood about the postmodern term. According to Étienne Souriau (1990), in principle, the term "modern" means the present, so the postmodern can only be that which does not yet exist. However, the postmodern concept can be described as indicating not the future, but a present at the moment of breaking from modernity, a moment of transition. Postmodernity does not address the new modernity that rejects the precedent in the recent past. In principle, the sense of the modern must be considered when relating this postmodern neologism to modern times, to modernity, *"la modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif"* (modernity is the transitory, the fleeting, the fugitive), regarding Baudelaire in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (Souriau 1990, 1075). Therefore, the modern is not new, but a recent collective meeting the consensus of the time, which rejects the past and values current fashion. In general, what most characterizes modernity is the opposition and consciousness of rupture.

The whole of social discourse is in a zone of dissuasion articulated by the ideology of visibility, transparency, versatility, and the consensus to exhibit artifacts in a relationship that transforms cultural goods into consumer goods. Art for the artifact or the artifact for art is shown in spaces without any aesthetic sense. But they expect something, which can be a new look or any other innovation with old ways in new representations. Marc Jimenez reminds us in *La querelle de l'art contemporain* (2005)[4] of the famous contradictions since antiquity, of being for or against imitation (*mimesis*) and *trompe l'oeil*, the counter-reformation concerning iconoclasts, and—more recently—the opposition of the old against the modern in a political scenario. Consequently, the changes that modernity would bring to the senses would leave less and less space for tradition compared to the new arts.

The experience of the new has overtaken all aspects of daily life, transforming the representation of modern life, even before it could perceive the changes through concrete achievements. Thus, we believed in the transformation of the way of the arts in the 20th century. In the last decades of the 21st century, we experienced the arts in their senseless context, wherein the arts become a reality in a potentiated dimension. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, a conservative public prevailed against the provocations of the artistic avant-garde in the face of modern society's utopias. A series of artistic, avant-garde movements emerged, bringing art and social reality closer together, reaching their peak in the 1960s. Then came artistic achievement that was no longer understood by the ideologies prevalent until the end of the 1970s. Art entered a period where it sought meaning from the lack of orientation, which was understood as a crisis for it. However, this

moment meant the end of modern art for many art theorists and historians. References to artistic creation no longer held the same senses due to the lack of aesthetic criteria and the ideologies that guided modern art to its peak. Therefore, there was no meaning for contemporary creations and, especially, for art criticism. If, first, the meaning of these creations was not clear, then any judgment of aesthetic value would be without the necessary basis for the formation of opinion, classification, and definition of what could be accepted as art. Thus, through theories of analytical thinking, a possible and plausible reading began to drive art criticism, providing a language for reading and understanding works. The 1980s proposed a new context for society. The individual gradually established and affirmed its autonomy of choice and participation. In art, the process was the same, but without the striking ideologies that modern art defended at that moment of social and political involvement. It was underground art for the system and often provocative, which—contrasted in the following years, post-time—became more allowed without objection or resistance, a period known as the postmodern.

Thus, in contemporary art, through context and concerning modernity, we can understand the postmodern period as a moment of transition and know that it is a neologism, not specifically meaning an artistic movement or wave but only an expression to define this moment of changing values understood as the crisis of modernity. Therefore, the notion of the postmodern emerged with the architecture critic Charles Jencks in the late 70s through the publication of his book *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (1977)[5], which critiqued and attempted to reformulate the Modern Movement in Architecture. Jencks introduced the emerging trends in architecture under this new term, just as Giedion had done for Modernism, legitimizing it historically. However, since the 1980s, the postmodern concept has covered all artistic, cultural, and social aspects. While artistic and architectural achievements defined this neologism, intellectuals elaborated on their theories and discussions. Among the French scholars in focus—Barthes, Derrida, Baudrillard—we highlight Lyortard in opposition to Habermas's positions. Habermas revealed, in opposition to Daniel Bell, that modern art and culture served as a neo-conservatism vehicle, compromising its purposes of subversion to the political, economic, and social system. Habermas developed a critique of intellectuals who reject modernity in the name of their subjective interests, including the French thinkers[6] Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Jaques Derrida. Habermas's considerations were related to the purpose of rational communication, based on language and discourse while searching for an understanding—a consensus—between differences as a solution to problems in all areas of society, in both their ethical and aesthetic aspects. Opposing these

considerations, Jean-François Lyotard argued in *La condition postmodern* (1979)[7] against the consensual resolutions, defending the differences in the discourses. But is it not precisely from these differences that a consensus can be found? Therefore, the challenge seems to me to be the capacity of the majority to develop dialectics, rational communication in the domain of emotional actions. But it is precisely this emotional aspect that predominates many of the artistic and cultural achievements. This approach follows in the consequences of the cultural production that can be related to the kitsch concept, a German term that appeared in the 19th century and that was used by the theorists of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, among them Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They used the term "kitsch" to characterize the lack of originality and content of the cultural industry. For all its forms and characteristics, the kitsch proposes infinite reflections on aesthetics and is everywhere, being consumed by everyone.

Even among the most purist, Clement Greenberg's criticism is extensive in his essay entitled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). In it, he states that "avant-garde modernism was 'the only living culture that we now have' and that it was threatened mainly by the emergence of sentimentalized 'kitsch' productions—'the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture.'"[8] Well, modern times––each time replacing outdated ones. The intention to formulate an aesthetic judgment with pretensions of what is considered "good taste" is still a simple intention to meet a minority that shares the same affinities in the artistic or cultural universe. However, in our urban cultures, what would be the most popular taste?

Kitsch, Kitsch Art, and Postmodern Art

The different meanings in the dictionaries of the term "kitsch" present their etymological origin in Germany in the arts. In Berlin, since 1881, that term has emerged as an expression of what was simulated or dissimulated. With time, that term has become a concept of aesthetic judgment in the artistic environment, disqualifying the work of art. Thus, artistic novelties were kept far from the artworks already consecrated. However, in the following century, with industrialization and economic and technological development, kitsch began to refer to the depreciation of the art and culture market (Dettmar and Küpper 2007).

On the subject of art, we research this tendency of kitsch (*Verkitschung*)[9] in the works of great painters and perceive traces that led from great works of art to kitsch. Through observations, we identify the most pertinent origin for understanding this phenomenon of value replacement, exalted by the simplest forms of rapid perception and elements that offer greater emotional strength, whether on the material or spiritual plane. This process is how kitsch manifests itself. We can perceive the origins of kitsch's representation during the Renaissance with Tiziano Vecellio (Titian 1485-1576). By analyzing the main traits of small elements, we find the roots of kitsch characteristics in great works of the past—for example, in *Mary Magdalen Repentant* (1560), for her compromising look toward heaven in the countless novels that tell stories of love and suffering. In this way, later artists used the same theme, characterizing even more, but incrementally, these traces of an image with emotional appeal and a particular blasphemy over time. Thus, we see that the kitsch phenomenon finds nothing new, but makes use of great masterpieces, relating to traditional and emotional values and usurping the elements that appeal to feelings. Through them, kitsch is perfected over the centuries. From a 16th century painting by Titian to the 17th century, we find the next stage, the improvement of kitsch with the paintings of Guido Reni (1575-1642), one of the leading painters of the Italian baroque. Here, kitsch is characterized in a double sense in the interpretation of the painting *Mary Magdalen Repentant* (c. 1640). Mary Magdalen's unpardonable and, at the same time, seductive situation is admittedly a double sense motif that overvalues emotion and is now seen as kitsch painting. Not only today but during the time of European Enlightenment and the growing secularization of art, these motives were considered excessively sentimental, presenting particular hypocrisy. However, those paintings were exhaustively appropriated by the copyists in the following years, especially in the 19th century, when Reni's paintings were once again valued

in Romanticism, a time—characteristically sentimental—propitious to Guido Reni's masterpiece. The composition of these paintings had another importance for the period, adding to the double reading possibility of increased commercialization. During this period, the leading painter was Francesco Hayez (1791-1882), who worked with elements and shapes that composed modern kitsch. He also brought this religious theme with *Mary Magdalen Repentant* closer to art and the general public through the art industry's copies, pleasing them with the emotional appeal and characteristics of the ambiguous senses, which satisfied the demand of that period and culture, decorating many houses' walls (Thuller 2006).

In the reproductions, kitsch appropriates great masterpieces and transforms them into objects of decoration and the cultural industry's accomplishments. Great paintings are already in the public domain, giving new appearances to everyday objects, creating forms and formats of advertising and environments for decoration and design. However, kitsch is increasingly strengthened by the reproductions of great painters, as well as art, in its path from Dadaism through Pop Art, Kitsch Art, and Postmodern Art. It should not be forgotten that the artistic universe is composed of significant ruptures and, therefore, without a retrospective of ideologies for the significant ones manifested in modern times since the beginning of the last century. From modernists to pops, Jeff Koons embodies this image of the starlight in contemporary art with his postmodern sculptures. However, even if the pretension of a vacuum cleaner or a bathing suit is its ready-mades status, Koons appropriates kitsch in some artwork's series, such as *Luxury and Degradation* and *Banality* (1988), presenting himself as a pop artist in the kitsch world. His art, explained by his own words in an interview[10] with Antony Haden-Guest, aims at using the public as ready-made. The public is the subject of their dreams and desires. While Warhol came closer to Duchamps' ideas—believing that the mass, through the market system, in their organization would shine—Jeff Koons claims to believe in ideas as a factor of influence on the masses. In *Banality*, the question is the appearance of the public. Jeff Koons believes in collaborating through his artworks with the public's self-esteem, destroying any feeling of guilt or shame by the people who dive into their banalities. He also emphasizes in this *Banality* and *Celebration* series (Figs. 2– 4) the great motivation of these people, who report themselves to kitsch. This artistic realization intends to free the audience from complexes through Kitch Art, so the audience finds identification and, in this way, their art of life. And, Koons adds with conviction: "The public needs to follow its own history to continue to develop and form a new aristocracy, instead of trying to find a culture that only excludes it. In this way, the public must react to or believe in things it really experiences, in its own history, as such, what it really is" (Jeff Koons: Interview with Anthony Haden-Guest, 1992).[11]

Figure 2. Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles, Banality* series, 1988.
Photo by Marc Wathieu. Chateau de Versailles. November 21, 2008.
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Figure 3. Jeff Koons, *Pink Panther*, *Banality* series,1988.
Photo by Marc Wathieu. Chateau de Versailles. November 21, 2008.
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Figure 4. Jeff Koons, *Hanging Heart* (Red/Gold), *Celebration* series (1994-2006).
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Such conclusions on Koons' behalf have not lacked in behavior in our contemporaneity as we refer to global metropolises' rhythms. Conventionally accepted art, and also differentiated art, when adapted or even new, intend to change. Thus, inseparable from the socio-cultural context, such consideration for the Kitsch Art and postmodern sculptures of Koons is due to the meaning that Jean Baudrillard approaches in *Simulacres et simulation* (1981), in which, through appearances, one has the illusion of change as a novelty. This analysis is directed toward technologies, language techniques, and the formation of the image, which, being partially imaginative, can become kitsch. The subject gathers Baudrillard's main ideas, that, by his own confirmations, it would be necessary to understand the art and the history of art in the form of a burlesque parody of the artworks, simultaneously a retraction, characteristic of disillusion, and employing a more or less kitsch form, of all forms, according to each one's culture. It is what the author calls "a parodie de la culture par elle-même"[12] (a parody of culture by itself). However, the meaning of art in society is still a complex notion. And the discussion about art seems to be more focused on the sense of beauty than the subjects from which it is enriched. But what interests us, in this sense, is the function of art, which Niklas Luhmann (2008) characterizes as a confrontation of reality with another version of the same reality when he says: *"Die Kunst läßt die Welt in der Welt erscheinen"*[13] (Art lets the world shine in the world).

Therefore, with these references, like Luhmann, it is admitted that art in its system follows a process of differentiation, using the different forms and contexts in the selective activity inherent to itself. In this logic, one perceives the signs of the contingents of a reality. These indications show the possibility of another reality, by creating a more beautiful one, for example, similar or still with altered senses. The signs are presented by artistic means in opposition to the usual perceptions of reality. What, in the face of previous theories of art, becomes impacting and polemic? It is surprising as a cultural property, however, without considering art, the possibility of the absolute or unique sense, not even its consecrated or perfect definition, but merely as a means and moment for another reality.

However, Luhmann only introduces his analysis to formulate the main question about this art's principle, surprising and controversial, to cause and effect. Beyond his premise in the function of art, he advances differentiation as an art system toward an interdependent historical process. In response to the effects and role of art, this process presents alternative versions of reality, a reality that may not be perceived but that, by artistic means, may be evidenced. While without importance, it becomes essential, nevertheless differentiating itself from science.

Figure 5. Jeff Koons, *Self-Portrait, Made in Heaven* series, 1991.
Photo by Marc Wathieu. Chateau de Versailles. November 21, 2008.
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Therefore, in this sense, art becomes an obsolete resource. Consequently, without an assigned resource, art is only a means and evidence, by its contingent, through which science is guided. In this way, to understand and describe Koons's artworks today, placing it as the object of his market strategies to clarify the phenomenon of successor his image ahead of his own art would not add anything new to the analyses in the universe of art research, as the main theories have already presented about the context of market culture. On one hand, art is merchandise, and on the other, the artist is the star (Fig. 5). To remember Walter Benjamin, who in the 1930s foresaw the individual's sense for the spectacular, ironically stated that today's individual's dream would be to live like Mickey at Disneyworld.[14]

Benjamin understood that reproduction techniques would be meaningless if they could not increase our capacity for reflection or integrate into our experiences. If these techniques replaced the lived experience, we would be losing our senses. Even if we can presently access works of art through the digital universe and media, the original experience is unique. Benjamin analyzed this experience under the concept of "aura," which is still the subject of many discussions, regarding the possible democratization of art and culture from a decline of "aura" through reproductions. Initially, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,*[15] Benjamin talks about the technical reproductions in his time—the press, photography, radio, and cinema—that would lead to the detriment of genuine experiences. Thus, let us consider the aesthetic experience for our study.

In Benjamin's review in his essay, in the last published version, he clearly states that he did not really believe that the decline of the aura would make possible the democratization of art and culture, asking if the stars would favor the media as we know it today or if these would be the favored ones. The effects of this relationship we know very well in our consumer society and, already in the second decade of the 21st century, any individual could be considered a promising market strategist, learning the basic rules to build a successful image; the relationship between the media and its specific public had become interdependent. A particular public is interested in specific media if it meets their interests. This relationship of exchange is maintained by the stars, some of great prominence, in an intensive and ephemeral way, illustrating polemics, sad or happy stories, or even revolutionizing or destroying others. The subject of interest (the stars) becomes essential for the relationship of the public and media, and, for the stars, it is the opportunity to shine, whatever their image and history, as long as they become successful through public-media interdependence.

Figue 6. Jeff Koons. Photo by Art Comments. April 20, 2008.
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It is the main link in the configuration of a triple structure: the public-star media. It is a triple interdependence, periodically recycled by the public and the media, in their political, social, and cultural contexts, or the stars with their ideas and actions for their characteristics, all in new experiences for the image (Fig. 6). Like everything in this market system, art would not escape this relationship of interdependence and would also be playing its role as a coadjuvant and co-author of the new successful images (integrated into the system) as the stars of the capitalist scenario.

Final Considerations

Walter Benjamin anticipates the secularization of art, transformation of perception concerning new techniques of art reproduction, and the dissolution of the concept of art to the benefit of market strategies. Thus, some time ago, contemporary art became a system of management, planning, and economic profitability of cultural goods, proper of liberal democracy and post-industrial societies that have integrated art in their system of reproduction, annulling any possibility of the arts as a critical medium, in a controversial and provocative role that is proper of artistic attitude. However, the image value—the artwork valorization—from Bourdieu's[16] perspective does not depend on the artist, but on the cultural environment as a universe of beliefs when valuing the work of art as a fetish, giving rise to the belief in the power of artistic creation—considering the work of art as the symbolic and valued object. It is up to the artists or writers, but also to the complex system of belief production, the valorization of art in general and the distinction of values under a whole structure of social relations involving commerce, industry, the media, governmental and non-governmental institutions, teaching and culture, and so on. Bourdieu (1998) describes the interdependent system directing arts into traditional history, according to Benjamin, and fetishism in the name of the master, or when in the art social history, the analysis is limited to the context in which artists are inserted. Through the means of configuring the object, like the most traditional ones, artists present distinction and the valorization of their art, adding, in their individuality, their social origin and formation. Artists present the essence of the traditional model of creation in their work. Therefore, the artist becomes a leading creator of the valued artwork. Thus, Bourdieu adds to Benjamin's reflections regarding the ambiguity of the artwork for the public or the public for the artwork with a question about the contribution in creating the value of the artwork and the creator. Meanwhile, Niklas Luhmann's hypothesis, in his work entitled *Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst* (The work of art and the self-reproduction of art), deals with a system of differentiation for each type of art by the social network's differentiation functionality. In this process, beauty and ugliness—seen as codes by Luhmann—regularize the need for the idea content, showing that a specific type of system can be realized, producing elements that reproduce themselves in reality. Therefore, it is a self and closed system as reference. Thus, a system is observing and describing its own identity. If it existed, the autonomy of art would be for itself, in its system, and not for the observation of an external system in society. In this aspect, the process of differentiation by searching for criteria of beauty, representation functions, and, finally, the symbolic quality of the work of art are questioned.

The theme addresses the art system's functionality via the social structure of production and experience of the work of art. Thus, Luhmann presents a perspective in his theory counteracting any negativity with society and, mainly, with how Adorno defined the art system in search of its own field of perception by the reciprocal emancipation of society (*Verselbständigung der Gesellschaft gegenüber*), for Niklas Luhmann it is more about the sense of emancipation of the art system in society (*Verselbständigung in der Gesellschaft*).

In the late 1970s, questions arose about the sense of aesthetic innovation regarding art originality, authenticity, and the relationship with kitsch. Not only about the artwork quality but also the advance or regression in artistic realization when considering kitsch, or appropriating it, the completion of the work of art was characterized by the differentiated and unique values. As media theorist Norbert Bolz observed, Koons did not overestimate the previous art. On the contrary, he underestimated it; he disregarded the sense of a search for the vanguard or progress, emancipating himself from modern art. However, the dichotomy remains in the artistic universe, enriched by theories on aesthetic judgment, which discuss the relationship between art and kitsch in contemporaneity. Among some, the philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann's viewpoint stands out, grounding such theories by questioning Koons' benefit of a good sense for kitsch—that is, it is the affirmation of an art with "bad taste." Finally, that statement follows *l'air du temps* to define the plausible answer considering matters of taste judgment.

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Notes

[1] This expression was used in the article on an exhibition at the Château de Versailles that was as controversial as the Jeff Koons' exhibition. It was the artist Takashi Murakami, one of the stars of Japanese contemporary art. During Murakami's exhibition, the Parisian newspaper *Le Monde* published the essay on this subject by Marc Jimenez, a philosopher specializing in aesthetics and professor at the Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. Marc Jimenez, "Vive l'insolence et l'insolite contre puritains et puristes !" Paris: *Le Monde*, 2010.

[2] My translation from French into English. The original quote was: "L'art contemporain, avatar postmoderne, n'entre pas dans le jeu de la simple dualité entre le passé et le futur. Il est le présent d'une troisième dimension, celle du métissage généralisé, de l'étendue - et non plus de la temporalité - de ce 'spectacle' défini, il y a plus de quarante ans, par Guy Debord, comme le 'moment où la marchandisation est parvenue à l'occupation totale de la vie sociale,'" in "Vive l'insolence et l'insolite contre puritains et puristes !,"Marc Jimenez, Paris: *Le Monde*, October 1, 2010, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/10/01/vive-l-insolence-et-l-insolite-contre-puritains-et-puristes_1418850_3232.html

[3] Jeff Koons, Château de Versailles, Versailles, France, October 9, 2008 – April 1, 2009.

[4] Marc Jimenz. *La querelle de l'art contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 16-17.

[5] Charles Jencks,*The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

[6] Marc Jimenez, *L'estéthique contemporaine* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2004), 65.

[7] Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

[8] Clement Greenberg, Encyclopædia Britannica, May 4, 2020, Accessed on August 27, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Clement-Greenberg

[9] Gabriele Thuller, *Wie erkenne ich? Kunst und Kitsch* (Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 2006).

[10] "Jeff Koons: Interview mit Anthony Haden-Guest," in Dettmar, U. Küpper and T. *Kitsch. Texte und Theorien* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007).

[11] My translation from German into English. "Jeff Koons: Interview mit Anthony Haden-Guest," in *Kitsch, Texte und Theorien, edited by* Dettmar, U. Küpper and T. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2007) 302-304.

[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

[13] Niklas Luhmann, *Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur* (Frankfurt: Shurkamp, 2008), 144.

[14] Marc Jimenez, "Walter Benjamin." *Revue Mag Philo*, January 2011. http://www.cndp.fr/magphilo/index.php?id=95

[15] The third version was revised by Benjamin in the summer of 1936, in Denmark, with Brecht. The aim was to publish it in the magazine *Das Wort*, which was to be printed in Moscow during the exile period, and one of its editors was Bertolt Brecht. But this issue could not be published. The article was published later in a single edition. However, during the years 1935/36 in exile in Paris, Benjamin published the text, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility" (1939) in French. In 1974, this third German version (1939) was edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Herrmann Schweppenhäuser, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 471-508. Reprinted in *Medienästhetische Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 351-383.

[16] Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 376.

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