

## Art Theory Contexts

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Art theory shift since late 1970s toward semiotics, cultural theory, and pan-humanities critical theory

- Academic pan-humanities-social science theory becomes part of the professionalization of artworld careers: curators, art historians, critics.
- Identity politics theory wave from early 1980s-mid 1990s (race, class, gender theory; feminisms).
- So-called "culture wars" debates in public-funded art and political alignments of artists and artworld (1970s-early 1990s).
- Question of the "state of the arts today" is largely overdetermined and generated through an institutional context and a universe of discourse used to pose questions and posit answers.

Semiotics, intertextuality (intermediality) and the current art scene

- Differentiating synchronic (concurrent relationships) and diachronic (historical narrative) analysis, art in social and economic relations
- Meaning viewed through semiotic model of differences and oppositions that structure the possible cultural significance of work
- Viability of the "semiotic square" of oppositions and differentiations in analyzing art in a social context: network of relations is more complex than simple oppositional model.
- Intertextuality: a model for "intermediality": art making and art interpreting in contexts of prior work, traditions, codes, and values assumed by interpretive community.
  - Intertextuality refers to the network of content and code interdependencies for meaning, prior and concurrent works presupposed for the intelligibility of the work being viewed
  - What do the art works themselves and the "communities of practice" or "communities of reception" unconsciously presuppose about prior and contemporary work through which (and only through which) the work is intelligible?
  - A text is intelligible only through "a mosaic of references and quotations that have lost their origins" (Kristeva's definition of intertextuality). Art works are similar in mosaics of implied references and responses.
  - What is already encoded, part of a cultural encyclopedia, prior to anyone's interpretation (Eco).
- Now we have "intermediation" (all media, beyond *intertextuality*): network of presupposed prior and contemporary works through which anything is interpreted.
- Semiosis: art works in ongoing chain or dialogue of interpretations and responses; meaning produced through semiotic structure like language and other symbolic forms.
- "The interpretation of a text will always take the form of another text." (Eco)
  - Translated to art: "The interpretation of an art work will always take the form of another work.
  - New works as interpretations of prior or contemporary works (semiosis).

Applied mediology

- status/role/function of the material art object in a digital and post-Internet world

- **social value of the "dematerialized" media of video and digital multimedia**

**Self-aware internationalization of the artworld, 1990s-2005**

- **Where are the art/culture power centers today?**
- **Superficially "decentered," the artworld reconfigures around New York, Berlin, London.**
- **Rise of Beijing and Asian nodes: More Asian artists establishing international identity.**

**Major transitions in the artworld, 1960s-2005**

- **Moving art off the walls and pedestals and into "lived space" or deconstructed gallery space in 1960s-80s**
- **Lens-based art coming into dominance: photography, video, all forms of hybrid photo processes and techniques**
- **Quest for new materials, non-"art" materials**
- **Power of the major international art fairs, festivals, and biennials**

**Table of Comparisons and Transitions**

Modern (1930s-1950s)	Postmodern (1960s-80s)	"Post-Post-Modern"? (early 1990s-today-?)
<p>Economics: art market a small scene, few artists, known channels.</p> <p>Galleries, dealers making a market in modern art works mainly in NY and Paris. Wealthy collectors establish market value of new artists. Museums establishing collections of "modern" works. Post-war boom in art work and shift in power to New York.</p>	<p>Economics: art market expands with growth in demographics in artworld players and growth of commercial art market. More aspiring artists entering the scene, colleges churning out thousands of BFAs/MFAs looking for market validation.</p> <p>Galleries/ dealers making a market in first-wave postmodern works, artists and dealers begin selling more to museums and corporate or wealthy collector collections (Saatchi, Broad, etc.).</p>	<p>Economics: art market expansion meets decline in recession of the early 90s. Artists relying more on institutional funding, grants, funded shows and festivals, museum purchases. Hierarchy re-established in art market auction business and upper tier galleries.</p> <p>Late 90s-2003: international artworld achieves self-awareness. Big festivals and biennials drive market value. Commercial and museum-institutional sectors becoming closely aligned.</p>
<p>Art as heroic struggle</p>	<p>Distrust of</p>	<p>Internationalization</p>

<p>with tradition, overcoming tradition but new work understood in context of grand narrative of art and cultural history.</p>	<p>metanarratives (Lyotard); suspicion of ideological agendas in "Western Art" paradigms; deconstruction of traditional art media and genres. Rise of feminism and identity politics as challenge to artworld roles and functions of art.</p>	<p>and globalization of artworld "industry" also brings global localization, self-inscribed narratives, unresolved identity politics. National and ethnic identity tensions in achieving international standing and market value.</p>
<p>Sense of triumphalism in modernism: Greenberg's Hegelian narrative of end-point of art in self-aware, self-critical art genres (painting, sculpture). Supreme goals of painting and sculpture believed to be achieved in modern, self-critical works.</p>	<p>Rejection of old triumphalism and signs of a new triumphalism of movements seen to destroy the illusions of modernism (Pop, minimalism, conceptual art, feminist art, outside art, graffiti art).</p>	<p>An anti-triumphalism triumphalism, a sense of relief or release from grand art-historical problems and struggles, with continuing distrust, and need to ignore, dominant cultures.</p> <p>Rise of "ignorant art": art making purposely ignorant of past and predecessors.</p>
<p>Art as "about" the formal and material problems of a medium (painting, sculpting, etc.) and a commentary on the making and limits of art in a specific medium. Abstraction privileged over representational art.</p>	<p>Adoption of mechanical techniques and commercial image styles, removal of visible artist's "hand," use of industrial materials. Rise in acceptance of photography and video in "high art" contexts. "Death of painting."</p>	<p>Continuation of art as embedded in social critique, works that question position and identities, multiplying of media and spaces. Photography, video, installations over painting and traditional sculpture.</p>
<p>Artists as visionary outsiders needing the art business world for</p>	<p>Cynical/ironic embrace of art business machine (Warhol),</p>	<p>Artists as court jesters in the artworld, getting grants, media</p>

<p>survival and communication of ideas.</p> <p>Artists and art begin taking role of religion and myth in secular, materialist world. Many artists identifying with the spiritual or transcendental. Other engaged in political resistance to capitalist economics and class system.</p>	<p>artists as pop stars and celebrities.</p> <p>Self-conscious ironization or parody of modernism and accumulated cultural "givens."</p> <p>Clash of discourses and movements in establishing the identity and goals of art and artists. Fragmentation and pluralism.</p> <p>Art becoming seen as performative acts by artists more than finished objects for business transactions.</p>	<p>attention, gallery shows, art buyers, museum exhibitions.</p> <p>End of trajectory of artist as autonomous agent against dominant culture (avant-garde): artists becoming positioned as autonomous and outside critique or accountability to public or marketplace.</p> <p>Continued: art defined by act of an artist: art is about "being an artist" more than making "art objects".</p>
<p>Sense of implicit, recognizable qualities of artworks that distinguish them from non-art objects.</p> <p>Greenberg's sense of modernism, "avant-garde" vs. "kitsch."</p>	<p>Discourses on "death of art," "death of painting" etc., as conceived in modernist categories or in grand narratives of cultural history.</p>	<p>Art as institutional fiat: what gets positioned as art in the artworld.</p> <p>Art as performance by artist, not art objects themselves or properties distinguishable in objects.</p>
<p>Inherited faith in content of art, art's values and mission in culture. Surface and depth categories retained.</p>	<p>Style over substance, denial of substance/content, celebration of surface over depth.</p> <p>Postmodern stylization: pastiche, parody, recombinant styles, use of styles detached from</p>	<p>Continued po-mo assemblage of detritus from cultural and political history. Embrace of historical and local critiques.</p> <p>Recombinant art from styles and signs of art. Experimentation with</p>

historical or cultural  
contexts and  
associations.

new materials,  
contexts, hybrids,  
scale.

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