

Originality in postmodern art



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A number of postmodern theorists and artists have questioned whether there is such thing as originality in art. Discuss this issue with reference to examples of the work of one or more recent artists who have questioned the notion of originality in their work.

Postmodernism rejects the modern idea of originality as the new, and substitutes it with a combination of elements from the past. One of the main characteristics of Postmodernism was its tearing down of borders between styles and various cultural elements and the advance towards seeking something new and original was discarded and substituted with an amalgamation of elements from past and existing cultures. (Perina 2006)

Postmodernism distances the subject, to declare the death of individualism. It leads to the reprocessing of objects and images from the past to create a more real and personal experience. “ There is too much information for us to process and make sense of and we are trapped in a world of second-hand experiences, dependent upon media representation of the world rather than our first-hand experience.”(Crouch 1999)

Originality as observed by contemporary artists, borrows heavily from postmodernist discourse. This essay will look at the works of several postmodern artists who participate in a critique and deconstruction of the myth of traditional originality whilst simultaneously seeking new ways to take their art in new and unexpected directions. It further inquires into the views of well known art writers and critics who acknowledge the way in which the placement of an artwork in a different context, or the re-working of an original image or images from the past can bestow it an entire new

understanding, therefore granting an element of originality. Sherrie Levine, Andy Warhol and their many followers questioned and re-positioned issues around authorship and the original in artistic practice. This legacy is important to explore as the appropriated image and the pastiche image is so central in today's art and commercial practice especially since the growth of digital imaging. (Hammerstingl 1998)

Sherrie Levine (b. 1947) is a primary example of a postmodern artist who confronts the issues surrounding postmodernist appropriation. Her critique of authorship and aura are central to Sherrie Levine's audacious and influential deconstruction of the modernist myths of originality in many of her re-appropriations of eminent works by male artists. (Delacour 2009) Since the early 1980's, Levine has made a career out of re-using or appropriating renowned works of art, often by making new versions of them and placing them in different contexts. (Walker Art Center 2007) Her works have been understood as a commentary on the death of Modernism and its ideals, notions of artistic originality, the authenticity and autonomy of the art object and its status as a commodity. (Museum of Modern Art 2010)

Levine's *Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp: A. P.)* (1991), (Fig. 1) is an unmistakable reference to Marcel Duchamp's famous 1917 piece *Fountain* (Fig. 2). Cast in bronze to a highly polished finish, it transforms an everyday object into a beautiful and ostentatious piece which is presented on a narrow pedestal that closely resembles the display of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Levine strove for total historical accuracy by locating a urinal from the identical manufacturer and year that Duchamp used, although she was unable to find the exact model. (Buskirk 2003)

When compared to Duchamp's sculpture, it is evident that Levine's Fountain is not an exact replica. Most notably, Duchamp's piece was an actual urinal which was turned upside-down and remained unchanged apart from his signature. In contrast, Levine's urinal is more contemporary and has been cast in bronze, the traditional metal of sculptors. (Walker Art Center 2007) This use of bronze in such a way makes reference to another artist, Constantine Brancusi, who was notorious for producing sculptures in highly polished bronze (Buskirk 2003). When polished to a brilliant shine Levine's urinal no longer remains a common, store-bought item. Instead it has been transformed by the artist into a unique object. (walkerart) Author and critic Martha Buskirk comments that despite the blatantly obvious reference to Duchamp's readymade, Levine's urinal has been transformed into a distinctive piece as a result of this choice to have it cast from highly polished bronze. (Buskirk 2003)

Due to the recasting of the fountain in bronze, she raises the question of is the sculpture any longer a "readymade?" Due to the material characteristics of it being altered. By recasting the urinal, Levine challenges the function of the readymade as coming straight from the modes of production of society. Her object is no longer inextricably tied to its presence in everyday society. (Buskirk 2003) Buskirk states that in one sense, Levine's Fountain is not a copy at all because she did not require the original Duchamp fountain to create a replica. Instead she attended the same source as Duchamp, which was the realm of mass production. Her piece triggers a history of references to past readymades and replicas of the everyday object. (Buskirk 2003)

Sherrie Levine's most blatant assault on originality came with her 1981 series *After Walker Evans* (Fig. 4), a series of twenty-two images which she directly photographed from an exhibition catalogue of famous photographer Walker Evans (b. 1903) work. (Fig. 3) Each one of these black and white photographs represents Depression-era documentation of either a figure, a group of figures, architecture or a barren landscape in a rural, economically-distressed area. (Mandiberg 2010)

In writer and artist Linda Weintraub's essay 'Unoriginality', in *Art on the Edge and Over* (1996), Weintraub states that Levine makes no attempt to recompose or reinterpret, dismissing any creative or original act with the intention that the images remain true to their reproductive sources.

(Weintraub 1996) These works articulate Levine's fascination with the photographic process and its reproduction, while raising post-structuralist discourses on authorship, originality and history, from which they partly originate. (Museum of Modern Art 2010)

Her appropriation of these fine art images deals with between photography, which is an unlimitedly reproducible medium, and fine art, which is regard as an inimitable object. Often art photographers limit the size of their editions to give their pieces the aura or a unique object. This aura is then diminished when the works are reproduced in magazines and books. Although the photographs Levine takes originate from the media, she restores them to the arena of fine art in her framing and presenting them as singular works which is where and how the original photographer, Walker Evans, aimed them to be seen. (Weintraub 1996)

Linda Weintraub affirms that regardless of the association between the originals and her copies, Sherrie Levine's photographs assume originality because they embody a new and possibly more profound artistic concept, which has never been so boldly explored. (Weintraub 1996)

In the perceived wake of Modernism, the heroic potential of autonomous artists or autonomous works of art was challenged as artists such as Levine sought to demonstrate the importance of these ideas in the wake of the massive increase in social image consumption due to technological reproduction. (Mandiberg 2010) She writes, "The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, bend and clash." (Levine 1981)

It is impossible to remove the art historical aspect to Sherrie Levine's art. She works within the space of art historical discourse and dialogue, in attempts to add new perspectives on art by actually appropriating and reproducing them in novel ways. So much of the importance of her works derives from the fact that these works are recognizable within the general American public, but more importantly in the art historical canon. (Zimmerman 2008) (reword)

It is perhaps Andy Warhol's (b. 1928) use of photo silkscreens that offered the most rigorous challenge to traditional definitions of originality. Warhol explored intrinsic multiplicity in the repetitive use of screens in his silkscreen

paintings that he began to produce in 1962. He produced a series of works containing ongoing repetition of an image within single works.

Often his technique of blotting would result in the ink lines in his drawings appearing as though they were a personal touch. The method he used also lent itself to replicating deviations of the image via a process of repeated tracing that he would often get his assistants to accomplish. Warhol frequently employed his mother to replicate his signature for him.

Consequently, Warhol's fame as a fine artist rests on the manner in which he expunged any trace of his hand from his work and any evidence of what would be considered individuality. (Buskirk 2003) (need this?)

This brief time in which Warhol began to develop his silkscreen paintings, was a phase in which Warhol was producing amazing output. It was during this time that he produced his infamous celebrity and name-brand product images. One of his most renowned examples is his Marilyn Diptych (1962) (Fig. 5) which was based on a publicity photograph from the 1953 film *Niagra*. The paintings of this time are excellent examples of multiple copies without an original. His method allowed for variations within the prints so that no two works were identical. Although Warhol employed assistants to produce works created by mechanical means to transfer images that he often didn't even select himself, his works are nonetheless recognised as Warhol's due to his certain form of authorship. It can be argued that his original contribution included the regular removal of evident participation. (Buskirk 2003)

One of Warhol's most renowned works was Brillo Soap Pads Boxes (1964) (Fig. 6). To make his replicas he used wooden boxes and silkscreened over them to directly resemble the cartons that they were reproducing. This work is an example of one form of mechanical reproduction being employed to duplicate another form of printed surface, although the change of materials added a slight change to the more dramatic transformation that resulted from their recontextualisation. (Buskirk 2003)

It could be argued that Brillo Soap Pads Boxes, and much of Andy Warhol's work, is absent of any kind of originality due to its almost undistinguishable resemblance to the original product in which he had no participation in the creation of, however he makes a striking contribution via his insightful critique of the enticing nature of commodity in a culture driven by mass media. He achieves this through his use of repetition. The anonymous author who designed or photographed the products adopted by Warhol for use within his work becomes replaced by the artist who comments on the products cultural familiarity, an act of recontextualizing. (Buskirk 2003)

In Warhol's Flowers (1965) (Fig. 7), he appropriated an image of flowers that he found in a 1964 issue of Modern Photography magazine. When the photographer of the photo, Patricia Caufield discovered that Warhol had appropriated her image she filed a lawsuit against him for infringing on copyright as she was able to claim legal authorship. The case was settled out of court, with Warhol offering to give Caufield two of his Flower paintings. When analysed, it is evident that there exists several differences between Caufield's image and Warhol's appropriation. First of all he cropped the photograph so that it focussed on four flowers; the image has been flattened

by the removal of detail and the adding of solid blocks of colour within the flowers. His changes in medium, scale and colour helped to transform the image considerably. (Buskirk 2003)

Although the original photographs that Warhol sourced to base many of his artworks on were neither taken by or owned by him, his works become original by the manner in which he re-works them and exhibits them. It is very hard to confuse authorship as Warhol upholds a style that is distinctively his own. He takes ordinary images and through his alterations of them makes them extraordinary. (Buskirk 2003)

In each of the cases presented, the artists have exercised an act of recontextualisation by taking a recognisable object or image and transforming it by altering how it is made or where it is found. Through this process each of the artists has achieved the act of both recognising and acknowledging the original author whilst claiming authorship for themselves via the process of this recontextualisation?. (Buskirk 2003)

The diverse ways that artists have adopted and transformed these familiar images and objects furthermore articulate a complex layering of quotation and reference that exemplifies contemporary art. (Buskirk 2003)

In addition, the artistic product desires a measure of creativity on the audience's part. The viewer contributes to the creation of works via their interpretations and evaluations of them. (Leddy 1994) French literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes attributes "authorship" to the reader who shapes meaning and understanding. Barthes created writings that directly suggested the idea of "Death of the Author" as a central post-modern

concept. (Hammerstingl 1998) He states “ To give a text an Author” and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it “ is to impose a limit on that text.” Roland Barthes asserts that each piece of writing or artwork contains multiple layers and meanings. In a well-known quotation, Barthes draws an analogy between text and textiles, declaring that a “ text is a tissue [or fabric] of quotations,” drawn from “ innumerable centers of culture,” rather than from one, individual experience. The essential meaning of a work depends on the impressions of the reader, rather than the “ passions” or “ tastes” of the writer; “ a text’s unity lies not in its origins,” or its creator, “ but in its destination,” or its audience. (New World Encyclopedia 2008) To summarise, Barthes attributes “ authorship” to the reader who forms meaning and understanding.

To reiterate, it is not the value and function that an object relies on to communicate with its audience, but its veiled references and codes from the past that permit a more individual perception. The originality and authenticity of the primary source ceases to be imperative in postmodernist art. Instead it is the recycled message which is constructed upon the unconscious memories and perceptions from the past that gives command to new perceptions and new perspectives of originality. The amalgamation of non-referring styles united together helps to create a new “ original”, assembled from well identified originals of the past. Equally the postmodernist concept of deconstruction utilises the intercommunication amid the influence and continual process of referring. (Perina 2006)