

Ethics of appropriation across traditional art and design fields



You wouldn't photograph an Art exhibition in the NGV and claim the work on the walls as your own, would you?

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will explore the ethics of appropriation across traditional art and design fields. Appropriation in art means to “ properly adopt, borrow, recycle or sample aspects (or the entire form) of culture.” Which we see utilised by artists and stems ultimately from the concept that that the original creator of the idea does not solely have ownership of the idea and it is in fact flexible.

I previously agreed with this concept within my own limitations of that statement, however, after researching this essay, I have since had my limitations on this concept challenged and agree that the statement is ethical and fair, I hope to provide evidence to support this and you, the reader, will also consider that appropriation of others' ideas is fair and reasonable if it furthers the catalogue of creative examples available to the world.

BODY

I'll start with a brief introduction to the idea of appropriation as an art moment firstly, in the 1960's artists such as Andy Warhol start producing work that appropriated consumer culture and celebrity stills for art, an art that Warhol is loved for, John Baldessari, begins working with Hollywood film stills and Robert Heinecken works with magazine advertisements and print pornography. These three are not the only artists exploring appropriation at this time, but they have the most influence on the 1970's wave of
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appropriation artists which would include Sherrie Levine, Vikky Alexander, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince.

I'd like to focus on Richard Prince, who is an American Artist whose made a career of questioning the idea of ownership and whose work is controversial because of it. Prince, born in 1949, was a fairly unknown artist for the first ten years of his career, before 1977, when he photographed, four photographs that had previously appeared in the New York Times. This process of " re-photographing" would become his main focus for the next sixteen years and continues to influence Prince's career to the present day.

When asked to describe his experience of appropriation, Prince was recorded as saying: *" At first it was pretty reckless. Plagiarising someone else's photograph, making a new picture effortlessly. Making the exposure, looking through the lens and clicking, felt like an unwellings.. A whole new history without the old one. It absolutely destroyed any associations I had experienced with putting things together. And of course the whole thing about the naturalness of the film's ability to appropriate. I always thought it had a lot to do with having a chip on your shoulder."* (Prince, BOMB Magazine, 1982)

In 1983, while he was working in Time Magazine's tear sheet's department, he rephotographed a Marlboro cigarette ad, cropping out all text and framing the image from the advertisement so that it looked like it could be fine art. He had in this work identified a symbol of American culture that embodied a societies image that it was adventurous and ruggedly individual, it was an idealised figure which a prince thought to be wishful and so he repurposed

the image so that it would itself question the very nature of the symbol that went along with the original advertising which is what art is supposed to do, document and critic culture to encourage contemplation of the human condition. He would later sell this rephotograph in 2005 for more than \$1 million at an auction for Christie's New York.

Sam abell would later say in an interview three years after that Princes work was lazy and that he had stolen his work “ *I'm not particularly amused ... it's obviously plagiarism, and I was taught by my parents the sin of that ... it seems to be breaking the golden rule ... he has to live with that.*” (Abell, PDN interview, 2008)

Later in 1983, Prince would again make headlines, which would cement his reputation as a controversial and contempuist artist, with a work he titled “ *Spiritual America*” where he explored the necessity of a photograph taken by Gary Gross as part of his project “ the woman in the child.” Where Gross had attempted to explore the femininity and sexuality of prepubescent girls by comparing them to adult women, a series

later described as iconic although also discussed as possibly pornographic in exchange for a \$450 payment to her mother of a young ten year old girl wearing caked on makeup and posed naked, oiled and shiny in a bathtub – Gross distributed these images in glossy magazines most disturbingly one owned by Playboy Magazine as well as an Art a Gallery.

Prince, had taken the original photograph, and critiquing the fetishisation of young girls within American Culture he put it in a frame highlighted with gold, and without adding any commentary except the title, he redistributed <https://assignbuster.com/ethics-of-appropriation-across-traditional-art-and-design-fields/>

the image, which seems to continue to be controversial as it questions the ideas of ownership, and consent, as I researched it was said to be because Prince's work had coincided with Shield's mother attempting to have the image struck from public record, however it continues to draw contempt and was ordered to be removed from an exhibition at the Tate in 2010.

For the next 20 plus years, Prince continues to rework concepts from pop culture to create works that both critique and endorse the American sensibilities and the image they have of themselves focusing on high performance cars, lady motorcyclists, celebrities and the contents and images from advertising in that of glossy magazines.

Then in 2008, he made headlines again, after he appropriated the photos of French photographer, Patrick Cariou, who filed a copyright suit against Prince and won, the court ruled that Prince was liable for copyright infringement but the ruling would later be overturned when Prince appealed the decision on grounds of the work being of a transformative nature.

Prince's most recognisably controversial piece though was in 2014, after his daughter introduced him to the world of Instagram, a platform mostly used for advertising whether it be products or just a unrealistic life in exchange for likes, this of course appealed to Prince due to its advertorial nature and his own history of critiquing advertising. He would after viewing the available media create a body of work titled "New Portraits" originally consisting of 37 portraits displayed at the Gagosian in New York and due to the nature of Social Media he would receive almost instantaneous criticism in response to the images with viewers accusing him of stealing the images, two "victims"

of his appropriation filed copyright claims, and as people are known to do online, submitted to the artist suggestions that he should commit suicide, or simply that he sucks and that his work was the death of creativity.

There were complaints that the images were stolen, that the original creator is entitled to compensation and that the works shouldn't carry a \$100, 000 price tag. (Dillon, Noah. ArtCritical, 2015.)

It is this body of work by Prince that highlights the true reasonings behind our societies disdain for appropriation, we appear to be happy to share our images, our thoughts, our ideas all over Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for the validation of others however, when another person grossly benefits financially from our idea and does not offer any compensation then we start to discuss the ethics around appropriation. Of all of the articles, I have read on the criticisms that Prince garnered, I found the statement by 19 year old student Anne Collins to be the most telling *“ I just think about how I'm a working student in school, I'm extremely broke, and here is a middle-aged white man making a huge profit off of my image. Kind of makes me sick. I could use that money for my tuition.” (Business insider, 2014)* She would state that furthermore she didn't even take the photograph herself, her sister did.

We expect something for nothing, Prince illustrates this through his entire body of work. A 19 year old school girl who didn't form the concept for the photograph or take it, but feels that the photo is her property because it features herself as the subject expects compensation from Prince because he made money from her freely available representation of herself, she

doesn't mind if her 600 followers look at her image for free but if an artist includes the image in a body of work that makes money that is not available to her then the work crosses a line ethically.

Prince's, work though, has achieved its intended purpose, it has created a commotion and encouraged discussion around Social Media and the way we use it and what we expect from it. He has again, critiqued society and succinctly embraced the medium. After all the intent of the work was not to steal the specific images rather than to critique the medium itself and the way posting an image to Instagram changes the intended message.

And I'd like to ask at this point the opening question again, " You wouldn't photograph an Art exhibition in the NGV and claim the work on the walls as your own, would you?" But wouldn't you? Don't we go to exhibitions, museums, art markets, concerts and more on a daily basis around the world, document it on our phones and upload it to our Social Media feeds as a representation of ourselves? Ethically we view this as acceptable but if an artist gains financially for the same act it is stealing?

At this point, I was going to move onto the documentation via photograph of graffiti around the world that is then resold as high quality prints or bound into a book for resale by someone other than the original graffiti artist, which I had previously thought was unacceptable whereas photographers that take pictures of landmarks such as Flinders St train station and then resold as high quality prints or bound into a book for resale by someone other than the original architect was acceptable. However, I think the contradictory nature

of these two statements cancels out my original limitation around the documentation of someone else's graffiti works.

So I would like to discuss, based on the above information about Richard Prince, why as a society we have limitations around what is ethically acceptable when it comes to Art, Design and advertising. We have copyright laws, so that the original creator still has the rights to financially gain from their original idea, however Prince has won almost all of his Copyright suits by being a clever academic and writer in his own right, he knows how to employ the law to benefit himself and the nature of his works - which I think is crucial to freedom of speech and the right of someone to be inspired by someone else's work and create a representation from their own perspective or to critique the nature of the human condition and encourage discussion and introspection.

SUMMARY

In summary, our generation, especially, use our phones to document the world around us including art exhibitions or saving and resharing images of celebrities which we then post to Social Media as a representation of who we are. We need to move past the concept that we can steal bits and pieces of others ideas if it is shared for personal validation but it's ethically unacceptable for another person to benefit financially by stealing bits and pieces of others' ideas. I think it is acceptable to create the same piece of work from your own perspective and benefit financially from it without compensating the original creator of the idea/ concept as no two individuals have the same perspective or experiences so an art piece that means one

thing to one person, will never mean the same thing to another. It is acceptable to document other's works whether it be their use of Instagram or graffiti that is created without permission in a public place as long as the new idea or work adds to the catalogue of available creative works and engages the greater audience.

No matter if someone benefits financially from your idea, ethically appropriation of an idea leads to further development of the perspective and encourages discussion, therefore appropriation is culturally beneficial and should be encouraged rather than condemned as the work of lazy creatives.

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