The Avant-Garde in the Late 20th Century: 

Modernism becomes Postmodernism

A college student walks across campus in 1960. She has just left her room in the sorority house and is on her way to the art building. She is dressed for class, in carefully coordinated clothes that were all purchased from the same company: a crisp white shirt embroidered with her initials, a cardigan sweater in Kelly green wool, and a pleated skirt, also Kelly green, that reaches right to her knees. On her feet, she wears brown loafers and white socks. She carries a neatly packed bag, filled with freshly washed clothes: pants and a big work shirt for her painting class this morning; and shorts, a T-shirt and tennis shoes for her gym class later in the day. She’s walking rather rapidly, because she’s dying for a cigarette and knows that proper sorority girls don’t ever smoke unless they have a roof over their heads. She can’t wait to get into her painting class and light up. Following all the rules of the sorority is sometimes a drag, but it’s a lot better than living in the dormitory, where girls have ten o’clock curfews on weekdays and have to be in by midnight on weekends. (Of course, the guys don’t have curfews, but that’s just the way it is.) Anyway, it’s well known that most of the girls in her sorority marry well, and she can’t imagine anything she’d rather do after college. She makes her way to the sleek, glass-sheathed art building, fronted by a large aluminum sculpture of squares and cubes. Just before she enters, she glances around, wondering if any of the guys walking by could be her future husband. Everyone she sees is white, like her. Years later, she will consider painting these students and their
academic environment. But today, all she thinks about is moving paint over the surface of her canvas in expressive abstract patterns.

A college student walks across campus in 2000. He has just been dropped off by his young wife, who often drives him to school on her way to work. As usual, he’s thought long and hard about what he’s wearing, and ended up his “Rage Against the Machine” T-shirt, camouflage pants, and flip-flops. The T-shirt is sleeveless, revealing his well-muscled arms lined with tattoos. The student pulls out his cell phone to call a friend as he enters the mustard yellow and dark purple art building. Before he dials, he flips the phone open to look at the digital image of his young son. The student is African-American, his wife Korean. Their son Lincoln has wide black eyes and a big smile. The student starts thinking about how much he likes this particular image of his son, and that he might want to import it into the video he’s working on in class this morning. Maybe he can also download that song he listened to last night; it would go well with the mix of images he’s editing together for his final project.

In the forty years that separate these two imagined college experiences, the world changed in ways that profoundly affected art, education, and the mass media. US dominance was challenged militarily and ideologically as countries that the 1960s student had never heard of entered the world stage. With ongoing warfare and widely dispersed class conflicts, the national economy fluctuated wildly. The 1960s student’s unquestioning optimism about a future of married comfort and security—a future like that envisioned in the ideal families she’d seen on television—was undermined when her first husband died in Vietnam. As her children grew up, they went to school side by side with the children and grandchildren of her parents’ maids and gardeners, an unthinkable prospect when she young. And that abstract metal sculpture in front of
her college art building? A big black Mickey Mouse head by someone named Claes Oldenburg was installed right next to it (12.1).

Throughout the end of the twentieth century, established beliefs about authority and identity were challenged and their claims to universality were overturned. As these challenges ripped through culture, the world moved out of the Modern era and into a new historical period usually known as Postmodernism. The art of the Postmodern period reflects all of the challenges and changes of its time.

The Transition to Postmodernism

Postmodernism began in the 1960s, a tumultuous decade of radical social upheaval. The Civil Rights Movement exposed racial biases in US individuals and institutions. Student riots tore through Europe and the Americas as young people protested military and corporate abuses of power. The Woman’s Movement inspired many women to seek greater self-actualization than they had found in traditional roles. Gay men joined together to fight policed abuses at the Stonewall Inn Bar in New York City.

The 1960s challenges to cultural authority were paralleled by technological changes that altered our perceptions of the world. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Room-sized computers began to transform information retrieval and storage. The Internet—a whole new form of trans-global communication—was conceptualized.

The 1960s forced many people to rethink unexamined beliefs and values and Postmodernism was born of this rethinking. According to Caribbean scholar Antonio Benitez-Rojo, Postmodernism is based on “a questioning of the concept of ‘unity’ and a dismantling or rather unmasking, of the mechanism we know as the ‘binary opposition.’” Freed of the traps of self/other in social terms and abandoning the high/low ranking of historic art practices, the Postmodern is characterized by hybrid and syncretic “transculture.” The hybrid nature of
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Postmodernism developed as previously marginalized populations and cultural practices moved in to share the center, which was thereby greatly diversified.

It should be said that Postmodernism is not ANTI-Modernism, any more than Post Impressionist was ANTI-Impressionism. Early Postmodern artists responded to and built on Modernism, just as Post Impressionist painters experimented with and then moved beyond Impressionism. As Frederic Jameson reminds us, “breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant again become secondary.” Indeed, much of what dominates Postmodern art was in fact anticipated in Modernism. Certain modern artists—most particularly Marcel Duchamp—had begun to challenge Modernist values as early as the 1910s.

Duchamp introduced several shocking innovations into avant-garde art of the early twentieth century. He challenged the modernist focus on male authority and originality, undermined modernism’s preference for the privileged medium of painting, expanded the concept of sculpture and questioned the modernist tradition of limited appropriate venues for art exhibition. In this chapter, we discuss Postmodern art that echoes Duchamp’s prescient innovations and similarly challenges key modernist values. We look at art that (1) challenges modernist identity construction, (2) challenges the modernist focus on originality, (3) challenges the preeminence of painting, (4) extends sculpture into interactive installations, and (5) expands the venues for art production and exhibition. In taking this approach, we are following Frederic Jameson, who suggests that Postmodern practices emerged as “specific reactions against the
established forms of high modernism, against this or that modernism which conquered the university, the museum, [and] the art gallery network…”

By the late 1980s, British professor Madan Sarup assembled a summary list of Postmodern attributes. He saw the period as marked by a deletion of the art/life and elite/popular culture boundaries, and a decline of originality and of the genius view of the artistic producer. He described Postmodern cultural products as eclectic, fragmented, ironic, allegorical, and self-referential, observing that they were often parodies, quotations, or pastiches. Other writers emphasize the plurality of Postmodern expressions. Noting the insistent recycling of old styles, they observe that complexity and contradiction (to quote the title of a book by Postmodern architect Robert Venturi) have replaced the reductive quest of Modernist abstraction.

What follows is a small sampling of Postmodern art. Precisely because this art is eclectic and fragmented, it cannot be contained by a singular historical narrative. The filters through which Postmodernism is presented here—how it performed challenges to and expansions of Modernism—do not comprise a “canon” or official manner in which to understand the art. While other accounts of Postmodern may include some of the artists listed below, they never include exactly the same list. Indeed, they are bound to include many artists not mentioned here.

1. Challenges to the Authority of Modernist Identity Construction: New Images of Gender, Race & Sexuality

At the center of Modernism was the heterosexual European man. Baudrillard’s concept of the modern artist was a heroic male genius whose excursions through Paris often ended up in bordellos. To challenge the modernist construction of the creative persona, Postmodern artists and critics began to ask why male activities had been privileged and why males alone had been empowered to immortalize human actions in art. Soon the gender-based focus of their challenges
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broadened to include interrogations of race and sexuality. These interrogations of identity were anticipated in Marcel Duchamp’s art.

When Duchamp created the Rrose Selavy alter ego, he “became” someone else--someone with a different gender--and thereby performed a challenge to the dominance of white male authority (12.2). He also challenged the long-held Cartesian concept of a centered self. Duchamp’s artistic contemporary Claude Cahun was a woman who took a man’s name and created several photographic self-portraits depicting herself as split, contradictory, and occupying diverse subjective positions (12.3). At much the same time that Duchamp and Cahun were challenging the centered self in art, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was theorizing what is now known as the “decentered self” in psychology. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Postmodern artists continued the Duchamp/Cahun/Lacan challenge to the exclusivity of male authority and the concomitant exploration of identity politics.

12.2 Duchamp as Rrose Selavy.

12.3 Claude Cahun.
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The Artist as Male

In her pivotal 1971 article, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists,” art historian Linda Nochlin brought questions about the gendering of the artist to the attention of the scholarly world. Nochlin argues that historically, art has almost never been produced as “the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience,” no matter what the romanticized myth of the artist tells us. Instead, “art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occurs in a social situation, is an integral elements of the social structure and is mediated and determined by specific and deniable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator and artist as he-man and social outcast.”

Such social structures encourage certain groups or individuals, and forbid others. Nochlin calls our attention to a specific example from the academic tradition: women were denied access to classes on drawing the human figure because such classes employed nude models. “To be deprived of this ultimate stage of training meant, in effect, to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works…” However, as we shall see, by the late twentieth century, the social institutions that had denied women and people of color access to art training, exhibition, and sale were forced to change their once exclusionary practices. After Modernism, art production in Western culture was no longer dominated by a single social group—European men—instead, it was opened to a wide diversity of practitioners.

One of the earliest Postmodern explorations of identity was the Feminist Art Movement inspired by the Woman’s Movement of the late 1960s. Critic Craig Owens, who describes Postmodernism as “a crisis of cultural authority, specifically the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions,” argues that feminist cultural practices may have been “the most significant” artistic development in the 1970s.
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The Feminist Art Movement

In the early 1970s, groups of women artists throughout the United States and Europe began to challenge the kinds of institutional barriers to training in and exhibition of art that Linda Nochlin analyzed in her decisive article. Inspired by mid-century texts like Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) and other literature that came out of the burgeoning Women’s Movement, many of these artists began to realize that they would have to generate alternative social structures in order to facilitate the creation and valuing of art by women.

Illinois-born artist **Judy Chicago** (b. 1939) remembers thinking, “Perhaps I and other women would have to develop all aspects of an art community ourselves—making art, showing art, selling and distributing it, teaching other women artmaking skills, writing about art, and establishing our own art history, one that allowed us to discover the contributions of women artists past and present.” Working with New York painter **Miriam Schapiro**, Chicago founded the first Feminist Art Program, in 1971 at California Institute for the Arts. In collaboration with art historian **Arlene Raven** and graphic designer **Sheila Levrant de Bretteville**, Chicago later founded the longest-lived feminist cultural institution in the country: the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, 1975-1995 (12.4).

Chicago’s most famous single artwork is her monumental *Dinner Party*. 
Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party: Making History into Herstory

Chicago decided to create an artistic dinner for thirteen women who had made important contributions to world culture as a female response to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. Da Vinci’s painting is an image of thirteen historically significant men sharing a sacred meal. Rather than illustrating a religious event as da Vinci had done, Chicago created a communal ritual for viewers to participate in. Rather than representing the dinner table and its guests, she decided to actually make the plates and place settings, thereby re-valuing and re-integrating into the fine art domain the historically devalued and often female-dominated “crafts” of ceramic and textile arts. Rather than creating the work in isolation—in the manner of the modernist stereotype of the anguished, isolated artist—Chicago invited a large team of artists and students, male as well as female, to collaborate with her.

After initial research, Chicago and her growing large team of collaborators realized thirteen was far too small a number for the imagined dinner guests. They multiplied the number thirteen by three, creating a triangular table with a total of 39 place settings. Eventually, they lifted the table onto a large tile floor, on which they inscribed the names of 999 other women who had made significant cultural contributions—but who had been written out of history as it was generally recorded and taught in the mid-twentieth century.

Now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum, *The Dinner Party* is a triangular table, each side forty-five feet long (12.5). It is covered with thirty-nine individual place settings, each consisting of a unique ceramic plate and accompanying linens that bear the name and identifying symbols of an individual woman. In order to see the work, viewers must walk around the table and look down, one by one, at the names, symbols, and decorations that record how each woman made a mark on her times.
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One *Dinner Party* plate honors Judith, the heroic Jewish woman from the Bible who beheaded Holofernes, a Syrian general whose army threatened to destroy Israel (12.6). Another plate honors Sacajawea, the Native American woman who led Louis and Clark through the Northwest Passage on a route to the West Coast (12.7).

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) is honored as well (12.8). A former slave who became an outspoken abolitionist, Sojourner Truth was an important contributor to the African American oratorical tradition. When cautioned against addressing the audience of a Women’s Rights Convention because it was an unseemly thing for a woman to do, Sojourner Truth pushed
forward and exclaimed, “Look at me! Look at my arm, it’s plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman?” The Conventioneers let her speak and were awed by her powerfully expressed convictions.

The Dinner Party generated a good deal of controversy and discussion about its ideological and artistic merits. No one, however, disputed the impact of its powerful affirmation of the creative potential in women. Viewing The Dinner Party is almost a liturgical service: The momentary pauses at each plate become, one by one, symbolic retrievals of each woman from the obscurity of standardized history. The Dinner Party brings its viewers, including men, into a personal connection with what women have experienced and what women can experience as unique identities.
Another artist who deals with the feminist issues of gender and identity is Los Angeleno Betye Saar. Her 1972 *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* is an assemblage--that is, a three-dimensional collage--that turns the advertising icon on its ear (12.9). Lining the box like wallpaper are rows of maple syrup labels with Aunt Jemima’s smiling face. Inside the shallow red box is a large cookie jar depicting a “Happy Mammy” similar to the mythic character whose visage was used to promote the syrup. Rather than gleefully serving her white master/employers, however, the “Mammy” carries a rifle and a gun. Embedded in her skirt is a second image: a postcard of a black woman holding a howling white child. Viewers immediately realize that taking care of the master’s child—and, by extension, the child’s parents’ home—was not a “happy” task at all. At the bottom of the box is a carved black fist, raised in the salute of Black Power. Saar’s skillful combination of found and created objects makes her *Liberation* assemblage a visual summation of the deeply embedded social ills that were redressed during the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s.

Saar also explores spiritual issues in her art, as in her autobiographical *Black Girl’s Window* (1969, 12.10). The artist employs the window as “a symbolic structure which allows the viewer to look into it to gain insight and to traverse the threshold of the mystic world.” Of this particular window, she says, “There’s a black figure, pressing its face against the glass, like a shadow. And two hands that represent my own fate...”10 Saar’s fate, as it happens, was to have three daughters (two of whom are remarkable artists in their own right) and continue to make and exhibit art all around the planet.
New Yorker Adrian Piper also addresses gender and racial identity in her art works, among them two “calling cards” she produced in the late 1970s. One card, intended for her encounters in bars, addresses the power inequities of men and women in public places. It reads: “Dear Friend, I am not here to pick anyone up, or to be picked up. I am here alone because I want to be here ALONE. This card is not intended as part of an extended flirtation. Thank you for respecting my privacy.”

Piper’s second card addresses racial insensitivity: “Dear Friend, I am black. I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do. I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.”

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) began his career as a graffitist in New York City and he used graffiti symbols, such as the copyright sign that connotes approval or ownership for taggers, in many of his paintings. Some of Basquiat’s images celebrate the cultural contributions of African Americans, among them jazz musicians like Charlie Parker (12.11), whose processes of fusion and improvisation Basquiat echoed in his painting style. Basquiat also created images that address the political inequities of racist society, such as the dominant stereotypes of African American men as criminals, servants or entertainers. As bell hooks notes, Basquiat’s work “serves notice on the white liberal public [by] calling out their inability to let the notion of racial superiority go, even though it limits and distorts their vision…” hooks discusses Basquiat’s Obnoxious Liberals (1982) which “shows us a ruptured history by depicting a mutilated black
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Samson in chains and then a more contemporary black figure no longer naked but fully clothed in formal attire, who wears on his body a sign that boldly states ‘Not For Sale.’ That sign is worn to ward off the overture of the large, almost overbearing white figure in the painting.\textsuperscript{112}
Basquiat focused primarily on male identity: there are relatively few female images in his work. Tellingly, one appears in an untitled painting wearing a sign that reads, “Detail of a Maid from ‘Olympia.’” As hooks asserts, “A dual critique is occurring here. First, the critique of Western imperialism, and, then, the critique of the way in which imperialism makes itself heard, the way it is reproduced in culture and art.”

Another painter who has reconfigured African American history and identity in art is **Kerry James Marshall.** Marshall creates Postmodern pastiches of historically important images and kitsch materials in order to address social issues. His *Souvenir I*, for example, is a large scene of an African American living room (12.12). On the wall hangs a poster with small portraits of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr, John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy, and the words “We Mourn Our Loss.” A dark black woman bends over a faux marble table. Marshall has
given her glittery angel wings, and surrounded the entire composition with a glittered fringe. At ceiling level in the living room, photographic images of lost children hover amidst glittered clouds. They have tiny angel wings framing their somber faces. The painting itself is not a framed canvas, but a painter’s drop cloth, attached to the wall through the grommets that line its edges. Although the “tacky” materials and “corny” images comprise a Postmodern challenge to the traditional authority of painting, Marshall’s powerful composition nonetheless compels viewers to stop and carefully consider its symbolic content.

Marshall’s strategy is very considered and deliberate. He has written: “I look for ways to place works in the museum that foreground African-American subjects, which are otherwise largely missing. To do that, the works have to operate on the same scale and with the same aesthetic ambitions as the art we commonly see there. I made a conscious decision to position my work inside the genre of history painting because that tradition is the backbone of museology. If my work embodies the same principles as that work, handing imagery under the terms it sets, then it has a chance.”

**Mapplethorpe, Serrano & the NEA**

Images of gender, racial identity and sexuality exploded in the US in the 1970s and 1980s—and many were profoundly disturbing to a public still expecting art to reinforce the traditional cultural values of heterosexual Eurocentric men. In 1989, two exhibitions shocked many viewers, especially conservative Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina. Helms used his powerful position to lead an attack on such challenging art.

One target of Senatorial assault was an exhibition of the exquisitely crafted photographic work of **Robert Mapplethorpe** (1946-1989), who had recently died of AIDS. Mapplethorpe often juxtaposed pleasing images of flowers with provocative images of the artist and his male...
models in homoerotic poses; he paired images of objects long deemed beautiful by the dominant culture with images considered deeply disturbing (12.13). Since both were portrayed with the same refined aesthetic, they forced viewers to interrogate the boundaries and meanings of beauty. As Mapplethorpe once said in an interview, “When I’ve exhibited pictures…I’ve tried to juxtapose a flower, then a picture of a cock, then a portrait, so that you could see that they were the same. I just would like people to be able to get the real meaning.”

Interviewer Janet Kardon responded, “You bestow elegance on a subject one would never consider as elegant—in the photographs of the cocks, for example.”

Apparently, Senator Helms could not see the “elegance” of a photograph of a “cock.”

Helms was also offended by a photograph by Afro-Cuban artist Andres Serrano (b. 1950) entitled Piss Christ, which depicts a white plastic crucifix submerged in a container of the artist’s urine (12.14). The senator bitterly criticized the photograph in a diatribe before the US Congress.
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Affronted that the federally mandated National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had contributed funding to such work, Senator Helms moved to drastically limit the NEA. What ensued was a long and often agonizing debate about the relationship between art and obscenity, and the role of censorship in a free society.

Eventually, the US Senate passed a resolution on both the suitable goals of the NEA and the suitable topics of art. The Senate Restriction on Use of FY 1990 Appropriation Funds reads, in part: “None of the funds authorized to be appropriated for the National Endowment for the Arts…may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce materials which…may be considered obscene, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

The senate resolution also restricted funding for art that offends “religious and non-religious” beliefs.

Andres Serrano responded with an open letter to the NEA. It bears quoting at length because it articulates the importance of artistic freedom of expression.

“I am concerned over recent events regarding the misrepresentation of my work in Congress and consequent treatment in the media. The cavalier and blasphemous intentions ascribed to me on the Congressional floor bear little semblance to reality. I am disturbed that the rush to judgment by certain members of Congress has been particularly swift and vindictive.

“I am appalled by the claim of ‘anti-Christian bigotry’ that has been attributed to my picture, ‘Piss Christ.’ The photograph, and the title itself, are ambiguously provocative but certainly not blasphemous. Over the years, I have addressed religion regularly in my art. My Catholic upbringing informs this work which helps me to redefine and personalize my relationship with God. My use of such bodily fluids as blood and urine in this context is parallel
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to Catholicism’s obsession with ‘the body and blood of Christ.’ It is precisely in the exploration and juxtaposition of these symbols from which Christianity draws its strength. The photograph is question, like all my work, has multiple meanings and can be interpreted in various ways. So let us suppose that the picture is meant as a criticism of the billion dollar Christ-for-profit industry and the commercialization of spiritual values that permeates our society. That is a condemnation of those who abuse the teaching of Christ for their own ignoble ends. Is the subject of religion so inviolate that it is not open to discussion? I think not.

“In writing the Majority Opinion in the flag burning case, Justice William J. Brennan concluded, ‘We never before have held that the Government may insure that a symbol be used to express one view of that symbol or its referents…To conclude that the Government may permit designated symbols to be used to communicate only a limited set of messages would be to enter into territory having no discernible or defensible boundaries.’

“Artists often depend on the manipulation of symbols to present ideas and associations not always apparent in such symbols. If all such ideas and associations were evident there would be little need for artists to give expression to them. In short, there would be no need to make art…

“Debate and dissention are at the heart of our democracy. In a free society, ideas, even difficult ones, are not dangerous. The only danger lies in repressing them.”

Years after the Mapplethorpe/Serrano controversy, Los Angeles artist Alex Donis’s works were similarly repressed. In 2001, Donis (b. 1964) was commissioned by the Watts Towers Arts Center of the City of Los Angeles to create an exhibition for the reopening of the Arts Center gallery. He produced a series of paintings he called “War” that portrayed fictionalized images of young gang members dancing with LAPD officers and sheriffs (12.15).
Donis wanted to erase the social divide between historically opposed segments of society by “queering” the conflict. He used dance as a metaphor in order to feminize the machismo that characterizes both groups.

But not everyone agreed with the artist’s goals. When the Watts community threatened to violently protest Donis’ exhibition, the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department closed the gallery and took the art down. Undeterred, Donis installed his paintings at another venue (Frumkin/Duval Gallery), where they received wide critical acclaim.

Modernist Values as “Quality” in Art

In the late twentieth century, as artists and critics began to interrogate the assumptions embedded in Modernism, they began to realize that what had for so long been considered “quality” art production was simply work that conformed to Modernist values. This meant that art produced by someone who was not male, art that denied the possibility of innovation, art beyond the commodified painting tradition, and/or art sited outside the elite museum/gallery domain was not valued, not considered “quality work.” African American artist Howardena Pindell has written eloquently about how race, class, and gender have been the basis for not only the critical evaluations of “quality” and “good taste,” but also how such evaluations have led to the art world’s systematic exclusion of large numbers of people and art.\(^\text{18}\)

In spite of criticism from conservative individuals and institutions, women and people of color have continued to assert their right, their need, and their ability to make art throughout the Postmodern period.

2. Beyond Originality: Pop Art, Appropriation & Media Critiques

Computer artist and theorist Lev Manovich has observed that Postmodernism is characterized by the eclectic assemblage of previously existing images and ideas. “[E]ndless recycling and quoting of past media content, artistic styles, and forms became the new ‘international style’ and the new cultural logic…Rather than assembling more media recordings of reality, culture is now busy reworking, recombining, and analyzing already accumulated media material.”\(^\text{19}\) The first major art movement to perform such recycling and quoting was Pop Art.

Even before Feminism and identity politics rocketed the art world into Postmodernism, Pop Art had signaled the transition out of Modernism. Pop Art closed the gap between the mass-
produced image and art. It transferred the mass media image, sometimes without even a change of clothes, directly into the gallery and museum. In doing so, Pop art upended the Modernist quest for absolute originality. The mass media had multiplied and distributed increasing numbers of images all over the planet; originality in art no longer seemed possible—or even desirable.

Modernist sources for Pop’s use of commodities can be found in Duchamp’s ready-mades, like the 1914 Bottle Dryer (12.16), which he selected in a hardware store then inserted, unadorned, into the avant-garde context of the New York gallery scene. Duchamp also explored advertising imagery: in 1916, he took an ad for Sapolin enamel paint and transformed it into a humorous tribute to his poet friend Guillaume Apollinaire.

Although the Pop Art movement began in England, its most famous practitioner is American artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987).

**Andy Warhol: Celebrities as Commodities, Commodities as Celebrities**

Warhol’s art reflects his interest in the processes of the mass media as well as its imagery. Born to lower middle class, Slovakian American family in Pittsburgh, he became a
successful commercial artist in New York in the 1950s. In addition to the fashion illustrations for which he was well paid, Warhol began doing drawings of shoes “customized” to reflect personalities of celebrities, such as a fancy gold boot for Elvis Presley (12.17). These drawings embodied one of the continuing themes of Warhol’s work: the process by which the mass media turns the celebrity into a kind of commodity. In the early 1960s, Warhol began to paint and draw images from the pages of newspapers. Headlines, columns of text, news photographs, comics (12.18), and advertisements were all depicted in the same rather flat, deadpan fashion; a movie star’s face was painted in the same emotionless style as a bottle of Coca-Cola or a can of Campbell’s soup (12.19). Warhol began to paint Marilyn Monroe in 1962, the year she committed suicide and became frozen forever in celebrity status (12.20).
Warhol used commercial printing processes like silk-screening, in which ink is forced through fabric or screen by pulling a squeegee across its surface. Paper or other material is used as a stencil under the screen. Before digital printing was available, the silk-screen process was commonly used to make the bold signs in store windows and supermarkets. When Warhol created his multiple images of the *Mona Lisa* (1963, 12.21), he allowed the ink to become dry for some of the images so that they appear faded and poorly printed as they would on newspaper pages.
Warhol used the silk-screen technique to make portraits of celebrities. The flat colors and the multiple images he obtained with this stencil method of applying ink or paint gave the faces of Marilyn Monroe the mass-produced quality that is part of the celebrity image. When Warhol produced the lithographic portrait of Elizabeth Taylor, he deposited the mascara and lipstick in the impersonal style of the silkscreen process used for his Marilyn Monroe silk-screen images. In these paintings and prints of celebrities, the public image seems about to slide off the person’s face—like a label that is coming unstuck. Warhol’s work compares the celebrity’s image to the same production processes that produce commodity packaging, and both in turn to the seemingly endless reproduction of art images in the mass media.

This process of equating personalities and products explains why both Chairman Mao and a can of beef noodle soup are subjects for Warhol paintings: they are both celebrities and, reproduced in the media, they are both commodities. Warhol underscored this process when he exhibited the Mao works: he lined the gallery walls with wallpaper in which the features of
Mao’s face were created in thin black lines over large purple ovals (12.22). One of the most powerful political leaders of the twentieth century was thereby reduced to purple polka dot interior design. (We have already seen, in Chapter 9, that advertising often participates in turning a person into an object, the process Karl Marx called reification.)

Warhol’s sometimes bludgeon-like emphasis on mass media processes inevitably makes the viewer more conscious of media processes and the power of media images. Warhol’s work is both cynically humorous and starkly realistic in its reflection of how the mass media—especially television—tend to reduce everything to equal importance and thereby mash perception into a kind of pulp. Warhol’s silk-screened paintings of automobile wrecks, the electric chair, and other disasters therefore make a cruel kind of sense. They are lifted, like Marilyn Monroe and the soup cans, from the same source: the newspaper, the television set, the magazine. We see them every day. We view images of violence and horror, endlessly repeated on a daily basis, and become increasingly desensitized in our passive viewing habits.

Warhol’s blatant and caustic realism illuminates the numbing affect of the mass media, even though he accepted it without any visible emotional connection or personal judgment. As
the art historian Lucy Lippard has commented: “Warhol…refuses to comment, and aligns himself with the spectator who looks on the horrors of modern life as he would look at a TV film, without involvement, without more than slight irritation at the interruption by a commercial…In this respect Warhol is true to the attitudes of our technological society.”

**Warhol’s Films**

In Warhol’s view, objects, images, and people all aspire to the ultimate and equivalent reality of being a celebrity. Long before the expansive inclusiveness of reality television, Warhol commented that he hoped our society would eventually reach a point where “everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes.” Everyone would then be a celebrity and, presumably happy.

People, things, and their interactions became celebrities because Warhol pointed his camera at them. Edie Sedgwick, Ultraviolet, and Valerie Solanas all appeared in Warhol’s films, and by doing so, became celebrities—at least for the required fifteen minutes. (One of his superstars, Valerie Solanas, shot and seriously wounded the artist in June 1968. The event is visualized in Mary Harron’s 1996 film, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, starring Lili Taylor as Solanas and Jared Harris as Warhol.)

Warhol’s films, besides elevating ordinary people to celebrity status, tended to downgrade established icons. His film *Empire State Building* (12.23) showed the iconic skyscraper from the viewpoint of a single stationary camera for eight hours. Unlike Monet’s discovery of splendor in the ordinary existence of Rouen Cathedral through the normal cycle of light and time, *Empire State Building* simply recorded what happened in front of the deadpan eye of the camera. For the viewer, boredom eventually made incidents like lights going on in windows or pigeons flying from windowsills into highly dramatic events.
British film historian Mike O’Pray writes of Warhol’s films, “Warhol seemed to switch on the camera and walk away. This was film’s own Duchampian moment and film has never recovered from it.” Discussing Warhol’s *Couch* (1964), a montage of footage shot of people doing everything from sleeping to cleaning a motorcycle, to having sex, O’Pray adds, “Such narcissism and passivity were utterly new, and created a cinema of fantasies acted out, uncluttered by dialogue…Warhol’s intense and austere gaze on the supposedly obscene, the sexual and the perverse is now a cornerstone of our visual culture.”21

French film theorist Jacques Aumont contrasts what he calls the variable eye of the Modernist camera with the cold eye of Posmodernity.22 Andy Warhol’s art presents some of the first images of this new “cold eye.”

**Warhol & Koons: Celebrity as Identity**

Andy Warhol went further than portraying celebrities: He became one. As London critic Rachel Campbell-Johnston observes, “Warhol may have tried to empty himself out, to eradicate his character, to drain inflection from his voice and emotion from his gaze, but in blanking his identity, he made it all the stronger. The ultimate groupie became the superstar.”23 Warhol’s art certainly celebrated the celebrity status of the movie stars and consumer goods he depicted. And he portrayed himself (12.24) in the same visual context as Elvis Presley or Coca-Cola.
Rather than resisting their status as celebrity and commodity, many Postmodernists celebrate it. Indeed, some Postmodern artists have extended the celebration of commodity status to everything they do, including the more intimate moments of their personal lives. Notorious among these is Jeff Koons, who claims to be “the most written-about artist in the world.” In addition to creating very Pop-inspired casts of consumer goods like basketballs and celebrities like Michael Jackson, Koons has also created larger than life sized photo-derived paintings of himself having sex with his wife, Italian porn star Ilona (12.25).
D. S. Baker asserts, “Where Warhol could merely declare that he was all surface, it is Koons who officially becomes homogeneous with commodity society—pure surface…[Koons] is a devilishly handsome white stockbroker-playboy turned to art, and he makes little claim for being anything else.”

Koons’ art—which is to say his self-promotion—angers and outrages many critics. Rosalind Krauss has stated, “Koons is not exploiting the media for avant-garde purposes. He’s in cahoots with the media. He has no message. It’s self-advertisement, and I find that repulsive.” And Koons himself has said, “I believe in advertisement and media completely. My art and my personal life are based on it.”

But not all Postmodern artists celebrate media processes. Indeed, many of them create work that is strongly critical of advertising and other media forms.
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Turning Advertising Images Back on Themselves: Kolbowski & Kruger

Buenos Aires-born artist Silvia Kolbowski (b. 1953) created a series of works in the 1980s, in which she paired images of luscious fruit with images of beautiful women photographed in the style of fashion ads (12.26). In one pair, we see the hands of a man as he cuts the peel off an apple, next to the image of a woman “peeling off” her clothes. In another, the triangle cut out of an apple pie is juxtaposed with the V-neck of a woman’s sweater. The comparison of women’s bodies and fruits has a long history in Western culture: remember the Buy Some Apples photograph from nineteenth century France. Kolbowski’s image pairings point out that the “delicious” images of women in advertising confirm their status as commodities, as objects to be consumed first visually and then actually.

[Images of works by Silvia Kolbowski]
Barbara Kruger (b. 1945) does not accept media images with a passive or “cold eye.” Instead, she takes the images and textual styles of advertising and re-frames them to make cultural commentary. Trained as a graphic designer, Kruger worked for Mademoiselle magazine for four years before she turned to art making. Today, she uses appropriated images and slogan-like texts to expose the manipulative affect of our media environment (12.27).

Carol Squiers has written in ARTnews, “Like her contemporaries, Kruger uses information and influences from the culture at large in her art, drawing on movies, television, advertising, and politics, as well as her former occupation as a graphic designer for Conde Nast Publications. She also culls images from old photographic annuals, how-to handbooks and magazines rather than taking her own pictures—another signature postmodern technique. But in a significant departure from most traditionally successful art making, she literally spells out her ideas, overlaying the pictures with powerful satirical mottos derived from popular wisdom, political double-speak [etc.]…Walking through Kruger’s shows is like a trip across a battlefield…”

Kruger’s Untitled (When I Hear the Word Culture, I Take Out My Pocketbook) (1987) is based on a photograph of Howdy Doody, one of the first commercial television characters created to appeal to children. The pairing of historic image and didactic text makes clear that
young people are socialized to think of culture as commodity, to consider images as models for products to be purchased.

Kruger’s *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* (1981) presents text arranged beside the sculptured head of a beautiful woman (12.28). Viewers are asked to consider the aggressive nature of looking, especially the aggressive nature of the male gaze and its relation to violence against women.
The use of media images in the works of Warhol, Koons, Kolbowski and Kruger was anticipated not only in the work of Marcel Duchamp, but also in the work of Robert Rauschenberg.

From Production to Reproduction: Robert Rauschenberg

The early art of Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) has been called Proto-Pop and Neo-Dada. Certainly, his infamous Bed (1955, 12.29), for which he erected a shallow wooden frame, covered it with sheets and an old quilt, then splashed it with drips and splatters of paint, is both a Pop-like celebration of every day materials and a Dada-esque anti-art statement. Even more Dada-esque is his Monogram (1959) that combines a stuffed goat, a truck tire, and a floor constructed of discarded street signs.

Starting in the 1960s, Rauschenberg began to use the silkscreen technique to transfer previously existing images onto paper, canvas, and other surfaces. Today, he also uses computer processes to combine images from the personal (family photographs), to the newsworthy (astronauts landing on the moon), from the quotidian (traffic signs) to the artistic (Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel Ceiling, 12.30). Rather than generate original images, Rauschenberg chooses depictions from the panoply of existing images and assembles them in
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ectecic pastiches that challenge traditional notions of the separation between high art and popular culture. His scattered arrangements of visual fragments also challenge aesthetic concepts of compositional unity and focus.

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Comprised of images taken out of context and repositioned outside their conceptual “categories,” Rauschenberg’s collages defy easy understanding. The collision of diverse and apparently unrelated objects and images recalls the experience of driving down the street while being assaulted by billboards or of flipping channels while watching television. Rauschenberg forces viewers to participate in creating meaning for his art of assembled fragments. He thereby compels viewers to question how meaning can be created amidst the tsunami of images that flood over us everyday in a mass media society.

Rauschenberg’s work also compels viewers to interrogate the boundaries between production (creating “new” images) and reproduction (assembling from pre-existing images) in artmaking practices.

(An extraordinarily multi-faceted artist, Rauschenberg will appear again in this chapter in reference to performance art, and then in the following chapter in reference to his early explorations of the relationship between art and technology that served as precedent for computer art.)

Appropriation as a Strategy: Sherrie Levine

Throughout Postmodernism, artists have been adamant that art can no longer pretend to the originality that Baudelaire had declared essential to Modernism. According to Frederic Jameson, “We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage.” As Duchamp had done with the Mona Lisa and Rauschenberg with Michelangelo’s paintings, later Postmodernists began to appropriate pre-existing art images into their work for various personal and political strategies.
New Yorker Sherrie Levine (b. 1947) is one of the most famous—one might say infamous—of contemporary appropriation artists. Levine has taken photographs of famous photographs by masters like Edward Weston and presented them as her own (12.31). What might have been negatively judged, in an earlier era, as blatant plagiarism, is in the Postmodern context considered a deliberate assault on the very possibility of originality. As Levine asserts, “The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged…Succeeding the painter, the plagiarist no longer bears within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense encyclopedia from which he draws.”

Levine’s work also calls into question the impact of mass media reproduction—usually through photographic means—on fine arts originals. She argues that her confiscation of Weston images merely continues the reproductive process on which publications such as this book are based. “Reproduction imagery became a question of property: what is original? what can we own? You didn’t need a philosophical or art-historical background to think about these issues; they had significance beyond the art world.” Indeed, they do, as we shall see when we examine computer images in Chapter 13.

Sherrie Levine refuses to generate her own style. Other Postmodern practitioners refuse to identify their output with a single unitary style whatsoever.
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Stylistic Pluralism: Gerhard Richter

Related to the Modernist valuation of originality is the valuation of a consistent style as the recognizable—and authentic—“signature” of the individual artist. Art critic Linda Weintraub notes, “…the process of developing a style is expected to proceed in a logical manner until it culminates in the production of works of art that embody the artist’s abiding world view. Art earning masterpiece status conforms to a biological metaphor that compares the invention of new styles to the evolution of new species. Each is a deviation from an established norm. It stabilizes long enough to receive a defining name before mutating into the next form. Rarely are artists credited with inventing more than one style.”

Dresden-born artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) defies the traditional emphasis on stylistic specialization. Instead, his work spans a wide range of creative output. Weintraub lists over twenty distinct approaches to painting that may be recognized in Richter’s work, among them are many paintings based on photographs: “Portraits, still lifes, cityscapes, landscapes… Repainted photographs from family albums, newspapers, magazines… Paintings that streak, blur or completely obliterate evidence of their photographic source… [and] Expressive handpainted images.” Richter also creates numerous abstract paintings, some gestural and brilliantly colorful, others restrained and geometric, still others in undifferentiated fields of gray. There is simply no way to identify a new Richter if the viewer is only familiar with one or two of his “styles.” How could any viewer recognize that the lush, thick impasto abstraction of Stadtbilt (1968) was created by the same person who painted the precise, photographically realist Portrait of a Young Woman (1988) and Betty (also 1988)?

Some of Richter’s early photographically-rendered works address cultural history: his Woman Descending the Staircase (1965) recalls Duchamp’s notorious painting of 1913. But
rather than depicting a cubist-inspired “explosion in a shingle factory,” Richter’s elegant woman in satin gown mimics the unreal sheen of fashion magazine images.

Raised in Nazi Germany, Richter rejects all overriding political belief systems. He asserts, “I have become involved with thinking and acting without the help of an ideology; I have nothing that helps me, no idea that I serve and am known for…no rules that regulate the how, no belief that gives me direction, no picture of the future, no instruction that produces an overly ordered mind.”

He adds, “Inconsistency is simply a consequence of uncertainty…At all events, uncertainty is part of me; it’s a basic premise of my work. After all, we have no objective justification for feeling certain about anything. Certainty is for fools, or liars…(My pictures) make no statements at all, so they can’t fool us.”

In denying the possibility of certainty in visual representation and embracing the ambiguity of multiple styles (many of which are drawn from demeaned or “low art” sources), Richter evacuates the historic authority of painting. Just as some of his images recall, however distantly, Warhol’s silk-screened images taken from newspaper and magazine sources, Richter’s words seem to echo the “cold eye” detachment of Warhol’s assertions.

3. New Forms for Art: Conceptual Art, Performance, Film & Video

Modernism proposed the classic binary formulation of artistic media: painting was considered a fine or “high” art whereas ceramics and textiles as well as mass media imagery were considered merely popular or “low” arts. We have seen that Baudelaire and many others were horrified when photography began to be accepted as art; indeed, it was not until well into the twentieth century that museums, galleries, and critical dialogue incorporated photography into the Art-with-a-capital-A category. It was not until even later in the century that the wide diversity of other art forms was appreciated.

When Marcel Duchamp rejected painting as merely “retinal” and turned his focus to the idea behind the art, he shifted the artistic focus from product to concept. When he incorporated
movement, sound, and film into his art-making process, he opened the door for explorations of new media that have exploded in the Postmodern era.

According to Michael Rush, “Duchamp’s radical shift of emphasis from object to concept allowed for multiple methods to be introduced to a redefined artistic enterprise. His importance rests not only in what he did but in what he allowed or initiated in art…No longer under the gravitational pull of the canvas, the artist was free to express any concept through whatever means possible. This concept can relate to the history of art, to the politics of the day, or to the politics of the self.”

**Conceptual Art**

In 1918, Duchamp completed a long narrow painting he titled *Tu’m* (12.33). Included in its scattered composition is a realistically-painted hand that he hired a professional sign painter to execute for him. In thus separating the artist from the physical execution of the work, Duchamp shifted the emphasis to the idea—the concept—behind the work. A few years later, Hungarian artist **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy** (1895-1946) more assertively separated himself from the execution of his artwork: Moholy-Nagy telephoned a sign factory and ordered the manufacture of five abstract paintings. He consulted the factory’s color chart to designate the colors, and used a piece of graph paper to determine the proportions. On the other end of the line, the factory supervisor made notes on a similar piece of graph paper and began the fabrication process.
Decades later, American artist Sol Lewitt (b. 1929) wrote out directions for the construction of his mathematically-based drawings and sculptures, then mailed or faxed the directions to the museums where the works were to be executed. More recently, California conceptual artist John Baldessari hired other artists to do paintings for him. He offered them a selection of photographs to use as sources, had them execute the paintings on uniformly sized canvases, then painted below the image “Painting by X [the artist’s name]” and signed the work as his (12.34). In doing so, Baldessari asserted that it was the artist’s idea that was paramount, not the execution of the work.

Art Based on Language

Citing Duchamp’s ready-mades as the “single event which changed the focus of art from ‘appearance’ to conception’ from the form of the language to what was being said,” Joseph Kosuth (b. 1945) began to use the nature of language itself as the focus of his art. In a work that recalls Saussure’s analysis of the signified and signifier, Kosuth’s One and Three Chairs (1965, 12.35) paired an actual chair and a photograph of a chair with the text of a dictionary definition
of a chair. Viewers were forced to consider the nature of signifying systems, how such systems relate, and the arbitrary connections between words, images, and the “realities” they point to.

Kosuth combines words with images and objects in his conceptual works. Jenny Holzer (b. 1950) uses words only in work that focuses on the anonymous, often aggressive means of public address. Her series of Truisms is a long list of pithy, often political aphorisms (12.36). Some are clichés; others are cryptic puzzles. Many recall the way authority figures such as parents, teachers and policemen deliver instructions and warnings. Here are some examples of Holzer’s
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Truisms: “Abuse of power comes as no surprise. A strong sense of duty imprisons you. All things are delicately interconnected. An elite is inevitable. Anger or hate can be a useful motivating force. Words tend to be inadequate.”

Holzer started by pasting her texts as street posters on phone booths and bus shelters throughout New York City. She has extended her format to LED signs, carved plaques and printed billboards. In 1982, her texts appeared on the Spectacolor Board of New York’s Times Square. Holzer’s texts have been sold on tee shirts, coffee cups, and pencils. Her recent Internet work is discussed in Chapter 13.

Happenings & Performance Art

When Duchamp appeared as Rrose Selavy, he performed a new identity as part of his art practice and thus anticipated what would by the 1970s become known as Performance Art. In Zurich, during World War I, other Dada artists—among them, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Tristan Tzara—similarly performed their art as absurdist theater using actions, images, words and sound.
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Additional roots of Performance Art can be seen in the action paintings of Abstract Expressionism. Although Abstract Expressionism focused on male experience, celebrated originality, privileged painting, and was sited in traditional museums and commercial galleries, it differed from preceding modernist movements in that it focused on the act of creation as much as the final product. Jackson Pollock saw the immense sheets of canvas he rolled across his studio floor as arenas for dynamic movement rather than as windows into another ideal world that mirrors ours.

The concept of art as action—rather than object-making—led American artist Allan Kaprow (b. 1927) to assert, “Pollock’s near destruction of this tradition [painting] may well be a return to the point where art was more directly involved in ritual, magic, and life.” Kaprow went on to create proto-performance artworks known as Happenings (12.37), which deliberately blurred the distinctions between art and life. Unlike standard theater, Happenings abandoned traditional narrative, involved the audience in the creative process, and focused on visual impact. Kaprow later wrote, “A happening, unlike a stage play, may occur at a supermarket, driving along a highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend’s kitchen, either at once or sequentially…It is art but seems closer to life.” Kaprow turned to Happenings after studying the avant-garde music of American composer, John Cage.
Los Angeles-born John Cage (1912-1992) began to study Eastern religion, especially Zen Buddhism, in the 1930s, and was inspired to incorporate chance and indeterminacy into his compositions and performances. He joined the faculty of North Carolina’s Black Mountain College, where many of his colleagues were European artists who had fled to avoid the destruction and repression of Fascism. Cage met Marcel Duchamp in 1942; the two remained close friends until the Frenchman’s death in 1968.

John Cage’s open-ended, conceptually-derived performances shattered the perceived barrier between art and life by involving audience participation (12.38). At Black Mountain in 1952, Cage organized his *Theater Piece No. 1*, which has been called the first Happening. Cage gave a pianist (David Tudor), a painter (Robert Rauschenberg), a dancer and a poet randomly chosen time brackets in which to enact designated activities. Simultaneously, slides and films were projected, and Cage himself gave a lecture. As curator Paul Schimmel notes, “Knowing the personalities of the participants, Cage had an idea of what each would do, but he made no assignments. In addition, this legendary performance took place not on a stage, but among the audience, thus dissolving the hierarchical relationship between performers and audience members.”

Later Happenings include Cage’s *4’33”* for which David Tudor lifted the lid of his piano then sat quietly for four minutes and thirty-three seconds; Kaprow’s 1964 *Household* which involved participants licking strawberry jam off a Volkswagon; and the 1961 collaborative *Homage to David Tudor* which involved Tudor at piano, Rauschenberg doing a painting that the
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audience never saw, Yves Tinguely coordinating a mechanical sculpture that was designed to self-destruct, and Nick de Sainte Phalle shooting balloons filled with pigment, so that the exploded color created a painting.

Korean-born Nam June Paik (b. 1932) met John Cage in 1958 and began to compose and perform what he called “anti-music” (recalling Dada’s anti-art) which was “designed to draw audience members out of the state of passive distraction”39 (12.39). For his first major exhibition (1963), Paik used three altered pianos and three altered television sets and “subjected the piano and the television set, two of the most culturally revered objects in the middle-class home, to a series of destructive acts so that they no longer functioned as intended.”40 One of the participants in Paik’s performance was the German artist Joseph Beuys, whose work is discussed below.

Japan-born Yoko Ono (b. 1933) participated with Paik and Beuys in the avant-garde group known as Fluxus, a flexible gathering of international artists loosely organized around Neo-Dada concerns (12.40). Fluxus artist extended the Dada challenge to the meaning and context of art, while expanding into performance and other new media.
For Ono’s early works, viewer-participants are instructed to perform singular actions. When her *Smoke Painting* (1961) was exhibited in New York, she personally walked each viewer through the gallery and asked them to watch the smoke as they burned the canvas with a cigarette. To exhibit the same piece later in Japan, she simply sent a paragraph of written text. For her most famous performance, *Cut Piece* (1964), Ono sat quietly on stage, and instructed the audience to cut away her elegant attire. Because Ono did not know and chose not to control the
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audience members, *Cut Piece* exposed her to actual physical risk. It thereby alluded to the ongoing threat of violence against women.

German artist **Joseph Beuys** (1921-1986) began doing Fluxus-related performance work after meeting Nam June Paik in 1962. For his first action, entitled *Composition for Two Musicians* (1963), Beuys walked onto stage, wound up a music box with two mechanical musicians and waited quietly until the toy wound down. That same year, he created *Siberian Symphony*, an esoteric ritual intended as “a contextual reference to expression, and birth and death.”

For his *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965, 12.41), Beuys sat in a Dusseldorf gallery, cradling a dead hare in his arms and whispering to it. His face was painted with gold leaf, transforming him from artist to shaman who could magically commune with the animal’s spirit. He spoke of the hare as one of the “figures which pass freely from one level of existence to another, which represent the incarnation of the soul or the earthly form of spiritual beings with access to other regions.”

Beuys’ *I Like America and America Likes Me* addressed the relationship of nature and culture (12.42). Four days in May 1974, he lived inside Rene Block Gallery in New York with a wild coyote. Dressed in a felt blanket and carrying only a shepherd’s staff, he arranged stacks of the
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Wall Street Journal (symbolic of US capitalism), played music on a triangle around his neck, and tried to befriend the coyote, who was symbolic of the “wilds” of America. In performances like these, Beuys expanded the boundaries of art in ways no one had since Marcel Duchamp.

Convinced that thinking and spoken forms constitute what he called “Social Sculpture,” Beuys began to move his performative work out of the gallery context to engage teaching and direct political action. He was one of the founders of Germany’s Free International University and of the Organization for Direct Democracy. As Schimmel notes, Beuys “transformed the role of the artist from that of entertainer to teacher, from clown to politician, from shaman to professor. As a result, artists of the next generation were accorded a new responsibility for defining the geopolitical culture in which they lived.”

One of the politically oriented artists influenced by Beuys’ ideas was Suzanne Lacy (12.43). Lacy studied with Judy Chicago in Fresno, California, where she and the other students began to use performance as a forum for grappling with what Chicago realized were the “real concerns” of the young women’s lives: “their sexual anxieties, their problems with their boyfriends and parents, possible pregnancies, the impossibility of getting enough money for food working at the degrading and low-paying jobs available to them…” In 1972, Lacy accompanied Chicago to
southern California where she participated in the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts. While there, she also studied with Allan Kaprow. The diverse influences came together in Lacy’s issue-oriented performance work that both addresses feminist concerns and eliminates the separation between art and life.

In 1977, Lacy orchestrated two citywide performance actions to dramatize and visualize the frequency of sexual violence against women. *Three Weeks in May* involved public media events, including monitoring of a large map at Los Angeles City Hall, inserting pushpins at the location of every rape and assault against women during that time period and participants picketing with signs and leaflets showing rape statistics. Lacy herself enacted her *She Who Would Fly*, a performative affirmation of female power in the face of ongoing victimization.

Lacy’s *In Mourning and In Rage* (December 13, 1977) involved a large performance on the steps of City
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Hall, where several women appeared dressed in black costumes that both shielded their personal identities and enlarged them physically to enhance the effect of their empowering assertions.

Lacy’s highly politicized work often requires extensive networking to involve as many communities and community groups as possible. It also employs media coverage as an inherent part of the work. For *In Mourning and In Rage*, Lacy asserts that the media “was used as both organizing device to bring people from different anti-violence organizations and different political perspectives together on the same programs—and as a way to create public dialogue on rape and women’s solutions for it.”

Film & Video-based Art

In addition to new approaches to art (conceptual) and new forums for developing artistic concerns (performance), Postmodern artists have also incorporated new media into their work. Michael Rush argues that “The final avant-garde, if one should call it that, of the twentieth century is that art which engages the most enduring revolution in a century of revolutions; the technological revolution.” Without doubt, photography, film and video-based works continue to lead artists into new Postmodern directions. Various Postmodern uses of “low-tech” film and video are outlined below. Postmodern artists who use computers, including those artists who depend on extensive computer intervention in their video and film work, are discussed in the following chapter.

Once again, the Postmodern exploration of new media was anticipated in the work of Marcel Duchamp, who began to experiment with film early in the 1920s. Duchamp collaborated with his friend Man Ray on a film titled *Anemic Cinema* (1924–26), which portrayed a series of circular discs. Nine of the discs were inscribed with Duchampian puns; they alternated with ten black and white geometric discs in a dizzying confluence of image and text. Also in 1924,
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Duchamp, Man Ray and Dada artist Francis Picabia collaborated with filmmaker Rene Clair and avant-garde musician Erik Satie to create *Entr’aacte*, a film which has been described as “a surrealist concoction of unrelated images.”

Other Modern artists who worked in film include Surrealist Salvador Dali (his *Un Chien andalou* created with Luis Bunuel) and Cubist Fernand Leger (whose 1924 *Le Ballet mecanique* is an early experiment with abstraction in film, 12.44). Just as Happenings and Performance art subvert the expectations of theatergoers, so artist films resist the standards of dominant filmmaking. Dali and Bunuel’s film fails to cohere into comprehensibility; Duchamp and Leger’s films are totally abstract. Similarly, Postmodern artists turn to film to accomplish things simply not possible in dominant filmmaking avenues. We have already seen that the first Postmodern artist to make a significant and ongoing contribution to film history was Pop artist Any Warhol. When Warhol began working with film in the 1960s, other artists were similarly employing the medium to create images radically different from their Hollywood counterparts. Many of them used film as an extension of performance art. This is particularly true of the Fluxus artists.

**Fluxus Films**

Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Film* (1962-64) has been described as the “prototypical Fluxus film.” Presented in Fluxus artist George Maciuna’s New York City loft, *Zen for Film* was a thirty-minute loop of totally clear film. “Actually an early installation (a tableaux consisting of a home movie screen, an upright piano, and double bass), Paik’s film turned its back to the entire
mechanism of large scale movie-making (from expensive film stock to lights, sets, optical effects, editing, marketing, etc.) …Stripping film to its barest essential (the film stock itself), Paik’s imageless projection became the minimalist example for all Flux films to follow.48

Fluxus artist Peter Moore (b. 1932) worked with Yoko Ono to produce two more Fluxus films. One is based on the instructions for Mieko Shiomi’s Disappearing Music for Face performance, which read: “Performers begin the piece with a smile and during the duration of the piece, change the smile very gradually to no-smile.”49 Moore shot a slow-motion close-up of the lower part of Ono’s face, focusing on her mouth, as she went from no expression to a smile, and then returned to no expression. Some of Thomas Edison’s earliest films similarly focused on a singular action of emotion. But by limiting the focus to only part of the face and slowing the action, Moore and Ono subverted film standards completely.

Of course, actions can be the object of slowed focus as well. Ono’s film No. 1 (1964) shows a slow-burning match. The common action, slowed and distilled, becomes a metaphoric narrative of the potential threat and imminent destruction of creative acts.

Cindy Sherman

In addition to creating actual films, Postmodern artists have also created photographic works that comment on films. In 1978, New Jersey-born Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) began a series of staged photographs that she called Untitled Film Stills (12.45). Each is a self-portrait, but in each she wears the make-up and costume of a totally different female character. Derived from the stereotypes of B-film narratives, the characters range from young career woman awed by the big city to exhausted fashion model splayed across a hotel room bed to suburban
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housewife crying in the kitchen. Sherman’s work, which has been called “one-frame movie-making,” exposes the constructed nature of female identity in Western culture. Curator Jack Cowat has written of Sherman, “By appropriating known types, her disruption of bourgeois conventions becomes all the more direct, obvious and effective…She is neither a dispassionate avant-garde robot nor a cynical nihilist, but an artist distinctly highlighting complex and high impact media messages.”50 The artist herself has said, “Even though I’ve never actively thought of my work as feminist or as a political statement, certainly everything in it was drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And part of that is a love-hate thing—being infatuated with make-up and glamour and detesting it at the same time. It comes from trying to look like a proper young lady or look as sexy or as beautiful as you can make yourself, and also feeling like a prisoner of that structure…”51

**Video-Based Work**

The artists who came to maturity in the early Postmodern period—the artists of Generation X—were the first to have grown up on television. For many of them, painting and the
other so-called “fine arts” had very little impact on their childhoods. Television was the powerfully formative medium. They observed the pervasive impact of television and determined to employ video in their art making.

One of the first exhibitions of video-based art took place at Howard Wise Gallery, New York in 1969. Entitled “TV as a Creative Medium,” it revealed the growing influence of media theorist Marshall McLuhan on contemporary art production. Artists Frank Gillette (b. 1941) and Ira Schneider (b. 1939) created their Wipe Cycle, in which images of exhibition viewers were briefly inserted into live television broadcasts. Gillette described the piece: “The intent of this overloading (something like a play within a play within a play) is to escape the automatic ‘information’ experience of commercial television without totally divesting it of its usual Content.”

Also in the “TV as a Creative Medium” exhibition were two works by Nam June Paik, Magnet TV and Participation TV (both 1965). Paik was one of the first visual artists to investigate video as a medium, and he did so as an expansion of his Fluxus performance and film work. Conceptually, Magnet TV resembles his altered pianos and altered televisions mentioned above: Magnet TV is simply a large monitor, set to broadcast live television images, with an immense magnet resting on top of it. The magnet “pulls” and thereby distorts the television image into graceful moving abstractions.
More recently, Paik has created tall statues composed of stacked televisions and television components, like *Family of Robot, Aunt and Uncle* (1986, 12.46), and wide walls composed of dozens of televisions programmed so that together their pictures comprise, for example, the American flag.

Media theorist Timothy Corrigan argues that “videotape technology and certain videotape practices have recast the structure of private expression as a functional figure capable of monitoring a public history and narrative through the force of immediate perception.”53 Several video artists have used the medium to comment on the nature of private experience as filtered through the video format.

**William Wegman** (b. 1943) began making humorous videotapes of himself and his Weimaraner dog Man Ray in the late 1960s (12.47). Some of the pieces are parodies of absurdist performance works, as the tape in which Wegman pours a line of milk across his studio floor and videotapes Man Ray walking along licking it up. Others are wry comments on how we personalize our relationships with our pets, often giving them human characteristics and capabilities, as the tape in which he corrects Man Ray’s ostensive misspellings. In one of Wegman’s funniest videotapes, he focuses the camera on his nude torso, moving his belly button as if it were a mouth (which turns his nipples into eyes), all the while singing in a high falsetto. Wegman’s idiosyncratic humor has been called “off-center, vaudevillian, droll rather than witty, based on apparent incompetence rather than skill in repartee…”54 His wide mass appeal sometimes obscures the real subject of his work, which is not dogs per se, but art and human experience.
Patty Chang’s *Eels* (1985) is a video work that addresses the intersection of performance art and network television genres. Chang is dressed like a young schoolgirl, in white oxford shirt and pleated plaid skirt. Two hands emerge from off screen and insert a live eel into her shirt. Unseen, the eel slides over her body as Chang squeals with fear and discomfort. The hands appear and insert another eel. Chang’s discomfort grows. A third eel causes more fear, more disgust, more yelling. The video ends as Chang screams in horror and the eels make her now-overfull shirt bulge and writhe with their motions. Chang uses her body to address the intersection of avant-garde performance art and popular culture products like the television program “Fear Factor.”

San Francisco-based artist *Valerie Soe* deploys video to make compelling social commentary. She has written, “Why do I make art? Mainly I’m tired of all the shit that passes for entertainment on television and in mainstream movies. I’m annoyed that with upwards of fifty
channels available on the average cable tv system, there’s still nothing to watch. Do we really need all those reruns of *The Partridge Family* and *Speed Racer*? As a species we surely must be able to come up with something more thought-provoking than that. With that attitude I’ve gone about making my own tv, since I can’t find anything I like made by the people who supposedly know how.”

Soe’s *All Orientals Look the Same* (1986) has three components. One is the title phrase—an oft-repeated stereotype—that is repeatedly read, by a male actor, throughout the entire minute and a half of the video. The second component is also audio: Soe reads out the names of dozens of diverse Asian nationalities and ethnicities. The third component is the visual: a series of modest black and white photographs of Asian and Asian-American men and women. The photos resemble passport or school photographs, and underscore the unflattering role of photography as identification tool. What happens as viewers watch Soe’s video is that the stereotype, for all its repetition, is proved a lie: these people do NOT “look the same.” Also, viewers become aware that it is precisely through repetition of statements that don’t respond to the diversity of human experience that stereotypes are generated to begin with.

Soe’s *Diversity* (1990) is a three-channel video installation created in collaboration with Chan Cheong-Toon. The artist says that *Diversity* “features footage of Mr. Chan Cheong-Toon, regularly seen at a traffic island at the corner of Broadway and Columbus in San Francisco’s North Beach singing furiously in Chinese to whomever cares to listen. Through interviews with Chan a well as with his many observers the piece addresses the projection of individual desire onto a single subject as each interviewee offers his or her interpretation of Chan’s intentions. The piece also explodes the myth of the model minority, contradicting the fallacy that Asians are quiet, well behaved and aligned with social conventions. Also included in the installation are a
number of names on the gallery wall of various Asian Americans who in various ways have distinguished themselves, emphasizing the diversity of a community too often stereotyped as one-dimensional.” The Los Angeles Times has said of Diversity, “This beautifully simple installation…raises complex questions about tolerance, personal freedoms and rights.”

4. Expanding the Possibilities of Sculpture: Minimalism, Installation & Earth Art

As we have seen, Postmodern artists challenged modernist beliefs about the central subject of the artwork and the identity of the artist; they subverted the modernist concept of originality; they undid the privileged status of painting and extended art practices into performance and the mass media. In addition, Postmodern artists challenged the traditional concept of sculpture as a three-dimensional form displayed on a pedestal.

Once again, Marcel Duchamp anticipated this development. Duchamp’s Etant Donnes is a large room-sized sculptural presentation (12.48). It employs many materials that had previously been considered outside the domain of sculpture. Further, it mandates an unusual viewing situation: by making viewers peep through a tiny hole in a wooden door, it forces them to behave as voyeurs. With its expansion of sculptural scale and materials, and its insistence on viewer interaction, Duchamp’s Etant Donnes can be seen as an important source for today’s Installation Art. In addition, Etant Donnes appears to be an architectural structure containing a section of the forest. Duchamp’s artistic intersection of art and nature can be seen as challenging the bipolar opposition of culture/nature. It can also be seen as anticipating the Postmodern form known as Earth Art.

The term Installation Art is used to refer to sculpture that expands to encompass an entire room, or at least a large part of a room. Unlike a traditional sculpture on a pedestal that viewers
experience by walking around it, Installation Art requires viewers to walk through it and experience it from the inside.

In addition to Duchamp’s work, another source for Postmodern Installation Art can be seen in Minimal art, which came to the fore at the same time as Pop Art (that is, in the 1960s) and was similarly situated in the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism. As art critic Hal Foster asserts, “minimalism threatens modernist practice […] it consummates it, completes and breaks with it all at once.”

Minimal art often employed large, simple objects that activated the viewing space and addressed the viewer’s bodily responses. Because it often elicited a physical rather than simply visual reaction, Minimal art can be contrasted with historic arts like painting—the art Duchamp called “retinal”—that focused solely on visual perceptions.
French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the phenomenological field, that is, our immediate experience as we actually live through it, can be used to help us understand the impact of Minimal art structures. Merleau-Ponty urges us to “maintain a proper appreciation of the central place of the body in our experience.” He suggests that, in Gary Guttig’s words, “we are so tightly and unreflectively involved in the world that we cannot really know our situation unless we momentarily back away from it in its concrete facticity and describe it in terms of ideal structures.” Minimal artists sought to physicalize such ideal structures in an effort to situate the art experience in the viewer’s body.

One of the best-known Minimal artists is American Frank Stella.

**Minimal Art: What You See Is What You Get**

*Frank Stella* (b. 1936) began in the early 1960s with large canvases onto which he had painted thick black stripes, parallel to the canvas’s contours. Between the black stripes, he left thin lines of untreated canvas that appeared to be light pinstripes separating the black bars (12.49). These early paintings were so large—many towered over viewers’ heads—and so assertively dark that they took on a moody, architectural presence. Like shadowy doorways or night-dimmed windows, they changed the interiors of any rooms they occupied.
Stella’s early paintings were conceived as self-contained objects referring to nothing beyond themselves. Stella summarized the intent of his paintings this way: “My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object...All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion...What you see is what you get.”

In its refusal to refer to anything whatsoever outside its own objecthood, Minimal art places the cognitive responsibility on the viewer. Meaning is not given; it must be discovered, usually through direct physical experience of the artwork. Minimal art requires that viewers engage their physical as well as mental selves in the art experience. Viewers must co-create the aesthetic experience phenomenologically.

The co-created experience of Minimal art often happens in galleries dominated by large abstract forms, like large Frank Stella paintings, that force the viewer into unanticipated physical
response. The response can be one of substantial threat when viewers encounter the work of Richard Serra (b. 1939). Immense sheets of rusted steel that dwarf the viewer, Serra’s sculptures often appear to be erected in tenuous balance, on the verge of toppling over (12.50). However lush and seductive the surfaces of Serra’s steel forms, their sense of danger charges the viewing experience with precarious ambivalence.

**Postmodern Installation Art**

From its roots in Duchampian sculptural expansions and Minimalist engagement of viewers’ bodily perceptions, Postmodern Installation Art has grown in several different directions.

French artist Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) examines the role of photographs in memory and history (12.51). He mines the culture’s photographic archive to locate anonymous images, then reproduces these images in evocative installations evoking nostalgia and loss. Each grouping of images points to a vanished community. Photographs of Jewish children from a Vienna high school in 1931—many of whom were no doubt later killed in the Holocaust—are stacked into altar-like configurations for Boltanski’s *Lycee Chases (Chases High School)* series of 1986-87. Illuminated by bare bulbs and positioned above empty lead boxes, the images are ghostly and saintly at the same time.
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Boltanski’s *The 62 members of the Mickey Mouse Club in 1955* (done in 1972) evokes a nostalgic longing for lost innocence. Curator Douglas Fogle notes that Boltanski attributes “a poetic melancholy of lost memory to the forgotten faces in family portraits and snapshots.”60 The “poetic melancholy” of his work creates a haunting evocation of fragile mortality.

For *Reserve-Detective, 1987*, Boltanski took photographs from *Detective Magazine*, a journal that presents “an indiscriminate blend of assassins and victims, the unintentional heroes of forgotten dramas.”61 Boltanski’s collages of anonymous black and white photographs were echoed in the backgrounds of Paul Fedor’s music video for P.O.D.’s popular song “Youth of a Nation.”

California-based **Kim Yasuda** uses photography, paint, everyday objects, texts and plant forms, arranging them to encourage the viewer to consider their evocative interrelationships (12.52).62 Much of Yasuda’s work is autobiographical. “I continually attempt to formulate a balance between the personal and the universal in such a way that the participants have access to their own meaning of my work,” notes Yasuda. Her search for self is predicated by issues of ethnic and cultural identity. Of mixed Japanese and European descent, Yasuda was adopted as an infant by Japanese parents living in Oakland, California. “I am, in part, third generation Asian-American lacking a clear sense of my origins. Much of my identity has been based in myth and taken from photographs, especially those of my adopted father, who actively documented the Japanese American community before and after World War II.”
In the mid 1980s, Yasuda began to explore her personal heritage in a series of photographic diptychs. She juxtaposed images taken from her father’s negatives with photographs she took of herself in what she calls acts of “pseudo-rituals.” In one example, a photograph of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony is paired with an image of Yasuda’s robed back facing away from the tea table in ignorance of the traditions of her own ethnic background. The series deals with what she calls a form of collective aphasia (the loss of the ability to articulate ideas), which can result when another culture, such as the Japanese, assimilates into the American mainstream.

In 1988, Yasuda created an installation that centered around a wall-sized blow-up of the suburban home of her childhood. A live hedge, bisecting the space, alluded to the civilized act of fencing in and fencing out, and what she considers the absurd separation of private property with camouflaged property. The hedge was pierced with an oval opening through which one could see a visually condensed mural of the Japanese flag. The central solar disc of the flag had been compressed to the cameo shape that often frames old-fashioned family portraits. On the opposite side of the hedge, a diving board topped by a rusted chair was cantilevered above an elliptical “pool” of wooden letter reading, “Gravity Was My Enemy.” The gallery skylights were replaced
with water-filled containers that filled the room with rippling reflections. The sound of Yasuda swimming laps in a pool filled the space.

Yasuda explains, “The installation was set in autobiography, yet I wanted the potential for interpretation to emanate from the viewer’s own experience. The diving board, chair and pool with wooden letters, for example, universally relate to all of us as we confront any choice or situation of risk. Many times we remain suspended in our indecision…”

Yasuda’s Abode of Vacancy (1988) juxtaposed Western and Eastern views of Nature. She paired an enlarged newspaper photograph of the Yellowstone National Park forest fires with a live Monterey pine tree, traditionally used as a Christmas tree. The tree was suspended upside down over a hearth-like sandpit referring to the center of a traditional Japanese interior. “The tea house, like Japanese architecture, has a strong affiliation with nature,” explains Yasuda. “The indoors and outdoors are perceived as being in unity. The Eastern sensibility holds that there isn’t space to own, so it is used sparingly. In the West, space is contained; we look out at landscape through the framed windows of an enclosure and displace nature inside to embellish our artificial structures. I wanted to create a unity as well as a disunity of the two cultures that moved away from the instructive and into the experiential.”

Postmodern Public Art & Earthworks

As Duchamp did in Etant donnes, Yasuda weaves the exterior (nature) into the interior (architecture) of her installation spaces. Other Postmodern artists work entirely outdoors, transforming city streets and/or the very surface of the planet into sites for their artworks.

In 1981, Richard Serra was commissioned by the United States General Services Administration (GSA)’s Art-in-Architecture Program to install a sculpture in the plaza in front of a New York City federal building complex. His Tilted Arc was 12-foot-tall, 72-ton slab of curved
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black steel that bisected the plaza (12.53). It immediately provoked angry response from the office workers and other city dwellers. They called it “a hideous hulk of rusty scrap metal” and an “iron curtain.” They said it was barrier to crossing the plaza and using the space for outdoor events like concerts. The protests continued, despite heated opposition from the art world, until the GSA bowed to public demands and ordered the removal of *Tilted Arc* in 1989. The incident proved that the general public has strong opinions about art—and that some art still has the avant-garde potential to challenge and provoke.

A contemporary public artwork that was similarly protested was eventually embraced by the public. Maya Ying Lin (b. 1960)’s 1982 *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, D.C. (12.54) is formally much like Serra’s *Tilted Arc*: a single angle of polished black granite, it is also an abstract geometric form of a single natural material. Initially, Lin’s *Memorial* was also controversial. Many Veterans had trouble with the abstract configuration and wanted to add a figurative sculpture to Lin’s design. Eventually, such a sculpture was added, but at a distance from the *Memorial*.

Today, Lin’s *Memorial* is a cherished tourist destination. The names of the 58,000 Americans killed in the Vietnam War are engraved on the surface of the black marble, and viewers bring flowers and other mementos to honor their beloved dead ones, whose names they
locate and memorialize by photographing or taking rubbings. Thus, they physicalize and transport home their memorial experience.

Robert Smithson (1938-1973) began creating installations in the late 1960s. Many of them involved placing mirrors throughout rooms or natural environments so that the reflections would alter and distort the original visual spaces. His *Chalk-Mirror Displacement* (1969, 12.55) incorporated sixteen large mirrors and untold pounds of crumbled white chalk in “a synthesis of the organic, formless material from the landscape and [the] rigid, manufactured forms as mirrors. The juxtaposition of these materials represented the dialectic between entropy and order.”
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Smithson commented on the metaphorical nature of the work: “one’s mind and the earth are in a constant state or erosion…ideas decompose into stones of unknowing.”

That same year (1969), Smithson moved out of the gallery and began to work with the earth. He found inspiration in the Great Salt Lake of Utah, which he described as “an impassive faint violet sheet held captive in a stony matrix, upon which the sun poured down its crushing light.” Using 6,000 tons of earth and stone, Smithson created an immense spiral moving from the edge of the lake towards its center. His *Spiral Jetty* (12.56) was wide enough for him to run along—indeed he had a friend create a film of the artist running the course of the jetty from a helicopter. *Spiral Jetty* was both an act of man’s intrusion upon nature and a reflection of natural processes. Many natural movements occur in spiral form. And the jetty itself was subject to entropy, erosion and decomposition. Long submerged beneath the “violet sheet” of the lake’s surface, it recently re-emerged as the water level dropped.
Cuban-born Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) also created art that explored the human/nature relationship. But unlike Smithson’s grandiose gestures intended for mass media viewing, Mendieta’s works were private ritual-based performances that only she observed (12.57).

Mendieta was trained as a painter, then turned to performance. “The turning point in art was in 1972, when I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I want the image to convey and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.” She created this magic in a series of ephemeral works in the landscape she called Siluetas (silhouettes). Echoing prehistoric images and effigies of earth goddesses, Mendieta’s Siluetas only survive as documenting photographs. In one piece, she submerged herself in a shallow creek in Mexico. In another, she excavated an abstracted outline of her body into the surface of the earth, filled it with red cinnabar pigment, then charred the edges of the outline. In yet another, she copied the outline in fireworks and set them ablaze in the night. Poetic and transitory, the Siluetas were
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fragile markings on the fragile surface of our planet. Exhibitions of Mendieta’s Siluetas are limited to photographs of her performative actions. Neither museums nor galleries can contain—or sell—the actual art.

Mendieta is not alone in resisting the traditional relationship between the artist and the commodification that has been the inevitable outcome of museum/gallery involvement. Indeed, many Postmodern artists have challenged and resisted traditional interactions between art and institutional practices.

5. Investigating the Modernist Institutions for Art Exhibition

Modernists assumed that there were limited “appropriate” venues for art exhibition and sale: large palaces like the Louvre that had been transformed into museums and the austere white cubes of commercial galleries. By the end of the twentieth century, however, as artists explored their bodies, their identities, the mass media, even the surface of the earth itself as sites for art production, they also challenged the expectations of museums and galleries as pristine containers for rarefied art commodities. They interrogated institutional presentations of art by examining the biases of museums and galleries, by turning art spaces themselves into artworks, and by taking art out into streets and onto the face of the planet.

Again, their Postmodern strategies were anticipated by aspects of modernism, particularly by Marcel Duchamp’s practices. For the International Exhibition of Surrealism in 1938, Duchamp transformed a room of the Parisian Galerie Beaux-Arts into a sensory extravaganza. He hung 1200 coal sacks from the ceiling. Although empty of coal, the bags still emitted enough coal dust to create a dark haze in the room. Stuffed with crumpled newspaper, the bags hung pendulous from the ceiling, constricting the space like a claustrophobic tunnel. Lights were dimmed, and viewers had to use flashlights to see the art on the walls. There were beds in four
corners of the room. A working coffee grinder filled the room with rich smells. During the opening reception, dancer Helene Vanel performed an exotic dance evocative of the performance art of the 1970s and 1980s. Duchamp’s room was a far cry from the refined spaces in which most art had been exhibited; it forced viewers to consider the entire room and the entire viewing experience as art.

Postmodern critics have interrogated the institution of the museum as well. Jean Baudrillard suggests that museums no longer educate, sedate or elevate, as they were intended to do historically. Instead, suggests Baudrillard, Postmodern museum visitors intellectually “play” with the cultural artifacts housed in museums in the same way that Postmodern artists “play” with past styles and past images.

One artist who initiated creative “play” with museum practices was Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976, 12.58). Broodthaers began his art career in 1965 with a Happening that denounced the institutional practices of art academies. In an ironic statement on the invitation to the event, the artist explained his Happening, which he called Nationale Academie: Une lecion de national pop art (National Academy: A lesson in national pop art):

“Pop Art?…I make Pop…How have I succeeded? Easily. I have just followed the footprints left in the artistic sands by Rene Magritte and Marcel Duchamp and those new ones of George Segal, Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg [three US Pop artists]…” Broodthaers later contravened museum/gallery practices when he took his artworks out of the commercial gallery in which they were being displayed and set them up in a public park, arranged around a group of street musicians. By 1968, he had transformed his home into a fictional or invented museum that asked pointed questions about art and its repositories.
Broodthaers’ *Section des Figures* (1972) was a parody of museum’s insatiable appetite for acquisitions, which results in objects being stripped of their original context. He assembled over 300 objects representing eagles, displayed them either framed on the walls or locked inside glass vitrines, and labeled each: “This is not a work of art.”

Why eagles? Broodthaers explained with a Duchampesque conundrum: “The concept of the exhibition is based on the identity of the eagle as an idea with art as an idea.”

Broodthaers’ “Eagle Museum” also assaulted the museum practice of putting every object into a culturally defined category. As the artist explained, “A comb, a traditional painting, a sewing machine, an umbrella, a table may find a place in the museum in different sections, depending on their classification. We see sculpture in a separate space, paintings in another, ceramics and porcelains…stuffed animals…Each space is in turn compartmentalized, perhaps intended to be a section—snakes, insects, fish, birds—susceptible to being divided into departments—parrots, gulls, eagles.”

What Broodthaers did not mention was the way certain groups of people have been treated as subjects for museum collection and display. This topic is addressed, however, in the work of Native American artist James Luna.

**James Luna** (b. 1950) is a member of the Luiseno Indians of the La Jolla Reservation in San Diego County (12.59). He has created installations and performances that deal with social and institutional treatment of Native Americans and Native American historical artifacts. He writes, “It is my feeling that artwork in the medias of performance and installation offers an opportunity like no other for Indian people to express themselves in traditional art forms of ceremony, dance, oral traditions and contemporary thought, without compromise. Within their
(non-traditional) spaces, one can use a variety of media, such as found/made objects, sounds, video and slides so that there is no limit to how and what is expressed."

For *Artifact Piece* (1987), Luna built a large glass vitrine like those used to display ethnographic goods in natural history museums. He actually laid down inside the vitrine in order to call attention to the archaeologists who excavate, empty, then display the materials of Native American burial sites (human skeletal remains as well as burial offerings), blind to the fact that these graves are sacred sites holding the remains of real people’s real ancestors. He installed *Artifact Piece* in the San Diego Museum of Man, where ancient Indian life was being displayed in the same fashion as dinosaur skeletons and plant fossils. (The museum had no representation of contemporary Indian life.)

Inside the vitrine, Luna was surrounded by labels pointing to his bodily scars and narrating how he received them. One label read: “The wounds on the fore and upper arm were
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sustained during days of excessive drinking. Having passed out on a campground table, trying to walk, he fell into a campfire. Not until several days later, when the drinking ceased, was the seriousness and pain of the burn realized." Luna’s personal stories forced viewers to think of contemporary Native Americans as real people with real lives and real problems—not the romanticized characters of Hollywood films nor the passive subjects of anthropological accounts.

While Luna’s art forces viewers to question the racism inherent in historic museum practices, The Guerrilla Girls challenge sexism and racism throughout the art world (12.60). The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous group of artists who first came together to protest gender inequities in art exhibitions. Their first target was the skewed artists’ roster in the New York Museum of Modern Art’s 1985 International Survey of Painting and Sculpture. Of the 169 artists, only 13 were women and none were artists of color. The Guerrilla Girls started by protesting the exhibition with picket lines and placards, but began to realize that they wanted to make a larger impact. They researched the percentages of women and people of color represented in US museums and commercial galleries and in critical reviews of exhibitions. They decided to make the results of their research public with posters which where pasted all over the SoHo artists’ community of New York.
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As the Guerrilla Girls determined to expand their critical examination of the art world, they decided to organize, to stay anonymous (so that their actions wouldn’t impede their own artistic careers) and to wear gorilla masks to maintain that anonymity. When they appear in public or give interviews, each of the Guerrilla Girls takes the name of a famous woman artist out of history: they “become” Georgia O’Keeffe, Kathe Kollwitz, Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, etc.

The Guerrilla Girls have gone from posters to billboards to mailing campaigns and art exhibits. The self-proclaimed “Conscience of the Art World” has addressed many controversies in the last two decades. Their 1988-99 response to the conflict between Senator Jesse Helms and the NEA reads:

RELAX SENATOR HELMS, THE ART WORLD IS YOUR KIND OF PLACE!

*The number of blacks at an art opening is about the same as at one of your garden parties.

*Many museum trustees are at least as conservative as Ronald Lauder.

*Because aesthetic quality stands above all, there’s never been a need for Affirmative Action in museums or galleries.

*Most art collectors, like most successful artists, are white males.

*Women artists have their place: after all, they earn less than 1/3 of what male artist earn.

*Museums are separate but equal. No female black painter or sculptor has been in a Whitney Biennial since 1973. Instead, they can show at the Studio Museum in Harlem or the Women’s Museum in Washington.

*Since most women artists don’t make a living from their work and there’s no maternity leave or childcare in the art world, they rarely choose both career and motherhood.
*The sexual imagery in most respected works of art is the expression of wholesome heterosexual males.

*Unsullied by government interference, art is one of the last unregulated markets. Why, there isn’t even any self-regulation!

*The majority of exposed penises in major museums belong to the Baby Jesus.\(^7\)

James Luna (a Native American man) and The Guerrilla Girls (an anonymous group of women from diverse races and ethnicities) are archetypal Postmodern artists. Working with performance, installation, and images appropriated from the mass media, they challenge outmoded modernist beliefs and practices—beliefs in the nature of artistic identity and the value of originality, and practices that determine the structures, valuations, and proper locations of art. In doing so, they expand the possibilities—and opportunities—for artists in the twenty-first century.

**Theorizing Postmodernism**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this survey of Postmodernism is necessarily selective. The focus has been on those artists who have challenged and expanded the cultural values of mainstream Modernism. Much of their work has been influenced by the politics of representation. It has also been influenced by and contributed to the development of Postmodern theories of culture.

 Critics have proposed many lenses through which to view Postmodernism. Following German theorist Theodor Adorno, we can compare Postmodern art with the realist art that dominated Western culture from the time of the Renaissance through the nineteenth century. Realism deployed what appeared to be a seamless narrative to present the illusion of a world that
is whole. In contrast, the fragmentary nature of Postmodern cultural production can be seen as a radical protest against what Adorno terms a “false reconciliation.”

Frederic Jameson has suggested that the two dominant features of Postmodernism are “the transformation of reality into images and the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents.” He criticizes the Postmodern use of what he terms “playful pastiche.” Asserting that “pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style…without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse,” Jameson sees Postmodernism as a time of “blank parody” that does not allow for individual artistic styles. According to Jameson, Postmodern culture “can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world but must, as in Plato’s cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls.”

Another way to view Postmodern art is to compare it with what immediately preceded it: Late Modern art. New York critic Kim Levin asserts that by the end of the 1970s, “Modernity had gone out of style.” Indeed, she considers Duchamp’s *Etant donnes* (first seen in 1968) the transitional piece between Modernism and Postmodernism. She observes that modern art was elitist and idealistic. It was preoccupied with originality, positioned the artist as god-like creator and linked art to the methods and logic of science (Impressionism and optics, Cubism and Einstein’s relativity, etc.) In contrast, Postmodernism is inclusive and playful. Past forms are scavenged, recycled, quoted, paraphrased and parodied in postmodernism. The boundaries between art and life are blurred. Postmodernism is tolerant of ambiguity, contradiction and incoherence.

It is important to remember that setting up contrasts between one cultural manifestation and another can lead to the pitfalls of bipolar thinking. Even as we compare Postmodernism to other phenomena, we should remember that Postmodern artists built on Modernism—and on
other art movements that anticipated it—which means that there are continuities embedded in whatever appear to be historical changes or ruptures.

**Myth of the Artist III: Postmodern Challenges to the Notion of Artist as Heroic Genius**

By the end of twentieth century, the long-held myth of artist hero was being challenged from within the art world. As late as 1960, modernist French artist Yves Klein had presented himself as shaman-like seeker on a heroic spiritual quest in the (manipulated) photograph of him leaping into the “void” of a Paris street (Harry Shunk, photograph of Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*, October 23, 1960, 12.61). Then in the 1980s, as Postmodernism advanced, a group of Canadian artists called General Idea created a farcical video entitled *Shut the Fuck Up* (12.62) that assaulted the popular notion of the avant-garde artist as a crazed, misunderstood genius. General Idea mixed mocking parodies of Klein’s work with footage from the popular television program “Batman” that showed comic book characters and a monkey competing in an art contest. In “quoting” Yves Klein’s art in their Postmodern video pastiche, General Idea used Klein’s art against itself and critically undermined the artist-as-heroic-genius stereotype the Frenchman sought to embody.
Readers should note that Postmodernism has not eliminated the ongoing presence of modernist attitudes and practices. Long after General Idea challenged stereotypes about the image of the artist, other culture producers clung to old modernist tropes. When Julian Schnabel, himself primarily a painter, created a bio-pic about New York artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (US, 1996, 12.63), he presented him as a tragically misunderstood genius, who was as alienated and wounded as Van Gogh. There was a major difference, however. Van Gogh was Dutch, working in France. Basquiat was African American.

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2 Jameson “Postmodernism” 123.
3 Jameson “Postmodernism” 111.
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8 Judy Chicago, Through the Flower, My Struggle as a Woman Artist (New York: Penguin, 1975) 66.
13 hooks “Altars…Basquiat” 38.
16 Kardon in Stiles and Selz, 274.
17 Andres Serrano in Stiles and Selz, 280-81.
19 Manovich 131.
21 Mike O’Pray <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/archive/innovators/Warhol.html>
25 Jeff Koons interview with Klaus Ottman <http://www.jca-online.com/koons.html>
31 Weintraub, et al. 245.
32 Weintraub, et al. 244.
33 Weintraub, et al. 245.
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35 Quoted in Britt, *Modern Art* 381.
36 Quoted in Rush 36.
37 Quoted in Arnason 489.
39 Schimmel 75.
40 Schimmel 75.
42 Arnason 632.
43 Schimmel 84.
44 Chicago, *Through the Flower* 79.
45 Broude and Garrard 171.
46 Rush 8.
47 <http://frenchfilms.topcities.com/nf_rclair.html>
48 Rush 25.
50 Collections of The Castellani Art Museum, Art of the 80’s.
53 Timothy Corrigan, “Immediate History; Videotape Interventions and Narrative Film” *The Image in Dispute, Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Andrews 310 (italics his).
55 <http://www.hi-beam.net/mkr/vs/vs-bio1.html>
56 <http://www.hi-beam.net/mkr/vs/vs-bio1.html>
60 Fogle, *The Last Picture Show* 15.
63 Arnason 652.
64 Arnason 652.
65 <http://www.xs4all.nl/AAna_Mendieta/Mendieta>
67 Goldwater 87.
68 <http://www.essex.ac.uk/luna/statement.htm>
69 Weintraub 100.
70 Pindell 18.
71 See Sarup 149.
72 Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in Foster 125.
73 Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 113.
74 Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 118.