

A Future Without Spectacle: A Refuge from Cultural Hegemony in Contemporary Art and Neo-Humanism

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Abstract

This paper explores possibilities for the future of popular culture. Central to the arguments in this paper is the search for a remedy to a visual culture that has been left deconstructed and fragmented by a Western obsession with postmodernism. This paper begins with a discussion of Boris Groys's "society of spectacle without spectators" (2012) and the ramifications of such an observation as homological to the state of contemporary art and the human subject. A discussion of the works of modern and contemporary artists is used to illustrate contemporary art's metonymic relationship to the future of popular culture. Specific examples are explored such as German photographer and film maker Thomas Demand's works that create a "critical fiction", Liljegren (2013) to highly engage the spectator, and are juxtaposed with postmodern speculations such as Baudrillard's simulacra.

The present dilemma of popular culture is best explained by Boris Groys: "today there are more people interested in the production of images rather than in their contemplation. This is a kind of society of the spectacle without spectators" (2012). My first intuitive connection is one between the state of popular culture and contemporary art. The fluctuating state of contemporary art can be defined by Gillick (2010) as:

Open-minded economic and political values that are mutable, global, and general sufficing as an all-encompassing description of "that which is being made now — wherever." But the flexibility of contemporary art as a term is no longer capable of encompassing all dynamic current art, if only because an increasing number of artists seek to radically differentiate their work from other art.

I noticed a connection between Groys' and Gillick's dilemmas. Groys was concerned with a preoccupation of the production of images rather than their contemplation. The interesting dilemma of contemporary art is a strained pursuit of artists to differentiate themselves highly from other artists. This is a very capitalist notion of works, and a nod to the perpetuating culture of popularization and commodification of art works in the twenty-first century.

One must produce the most interesting, the most recent, most divergent work to grab at the attention of the masses scrounging for the consumption of art in the popular culture of spectacle. It appears that this undefined conceptual

sphere of contemporary art is aligned with its undefined audiences who wish only to consume and appropriate images as products in the whole of popular culture. A preoccupation with consumption wastes no time in contemplation of a text's novelty as Groys proposes.

The dangers of art in popular culture perpetuate an undefined and fragmented state that consequently produces fragmented and disengaged audiences. It would then appear that the future is producing consequences of the further fragmentation of audiences, increasingly more dangerous than postmodern theorists may have predicted. We no longer have to define conceptual terms, such as contemporary art, because it is not necessary. The mere fact that scholars and audiences struggle to define what is contemporary about contemporary art exactly illustrates our unfortunate inability to want to or to need to contemplate images occurring in our culture. How dangerous then are these predicaments for the future when we consider our increasing dependency on the rhetoric of visual culture?

Art critic and curator Tobias Meyer said, "It [twenty-first century art] finally addresses the theory of contemporary art that is based on Jung, on the unearthing of the subconscious." He explains, "The art world right now is all about Pop and global culture and dispersing images via the Internet whereas [Toni Sehgal's *This is Progress*] is about exploring the deepest sense of oneself and the genesis of art" (as cited in Hall, J.J., 2013). Perhaps then the stasis of the future of our dwindling state of contemporary art is marked by a dystopian projection of crass consumerism of images and the opposition. The opposition sees a future encompassing a reconstruction of humanism. It is the latter that involves sincere contemplation of images or artefacts that will end the fragmentation and capitalist pursuits of culture. We need not a reconstruction of pre-existing humanism but a contemplation of a neo-humanism, one that exists freely from rational purity and the hegemonic, one that rebuilds the value of contemplation. The latter is an honorable direction to take into the future because it requires culture to participate in deciding the novelty of ideologies behind its artefacts rather than merely consuming the end product.

We should all look to the texts of the art world for a clue as to the future of popular culture. Meyer, as cited in Hall (2013), stated art right now encompasses all that is Pop. The postmodern tendencies of cynicism (Hall, 2013) and uncertainty then maybe are not the only perspectives to adapt our speculation of the future. To take the stasis surrounding contemporary art as a metonym for the stasis of the whole of popular culture suggests that however fragmented and de-centered pop culture has made societies, there is an agency for a truly engaged spectator. This agency is pulling us in the right direction towards an honorable future of pop culture; without this public agency any spectator is subject to cultural hegemony and its consequences.

Hall (2013) in "The New Aesthetic" urges us to consider new art forms amidst the many cynical postmodern works. The familiar postmodern works are purposely purged of aesthetic or provocatively self-destructive performance pieces saturated with spectacle. The extreme polarization of these contemporary forms is the result of heightened competition in the market of popular culture and aim to grab the attention of increasingly fragmented audiences. Hall urges the reader to consider works like that of Tino Sehgal's *This is Progress* (2010), which asks the viewer to contemplate: What is progress? It is a constructed situation where trained actors engage viewers in a conversation where they are seriously asked to contemplate the proposed question. Sehgal's work addresses the stasis of the future of popular culture. The success of the work itself is only one example of many more art works that counteract Groys's observation that people are more concerned with production rather than contemplation. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (2010) describes how "Sehgal seeks to reconfigure these conditions by producing meaning and value through a transformation of actions rather than solid materials." The conditions referred to are art's function as merely a produced and consumed good.

Our popular culture is so heavily media saturated. It is successful art works like Sehgal's that metonymically express the paradigm shift from crass consumption of images to meaningful contemplation that is taking place in popular culture right now. This can only project further into a not-so-distant future of even 50 years away. This paradigm shift is supported in "Boris Groys - Biography" (2012): "From the age of mechanical reproduction in the way that Walter Benjamin described it, for example, it is novelty that determines admission in culture. It is now based on the ability to introduce into the field of what is worthy of being painted, sung, or written, things that are at first deemed too mundane, lacking depth or so-called senseless."

If Marxism is concerned with the critique of materials that inform the overdetermination of ideologies because such novelty is placed on the material, then the future welcomes a philosophical underbelly where contemplation of ideology and its overdetermining factors will inform or change the material base. I use Sehgal's work here as a contemporary example which mirrors our current situation in the fields of cultural production. His predecessors such as those artists working in the early developments of earth works, performance, and notably those associated with The Fluxus Movement of the 1960s all share similar goals in combating consequences of excess.

Our contemporary dilemma of excess in digital culture is not a new problem. The rise of print culture in the 19th century produced a surge of cultural fear and anxiety. Rapidly increasing dissemination and multiplication of texts and images created a massive disruption in culture. One has to be careful in drawing too close of parallels between the shift into print culture and the shift into digital culture. However, it is noticeable that the speed and quantity of circulated images today is causing similar changes and disruptions to the way we consume media. Digital culture has produced assorted dilemmas associated with excess

and abundance. Today we have reached a critical point where we have more writers than readers, more artists than spectators. As a culture we will eventually have to slow down our consumption of images, as all species eventually face the consequences of a threshold where adaptation is a necessary means of survival. Lauren Collins expresses a similar perspective in her observations of Tino Sehgal's work: "He is not against the market—rather, he wants to work within it, to explore the notion of whether it might be able to traffic in something other than material goods. How can we continue to make things, he is asking, once we've reached the limits of growth?" (The New Yorker, 2012). In a saturated culture of trivial, subverted, and uncertain messages, we will have to heighten eventually our visual literacy to extract the meaningful and the important in a sea of fragmented and subjective puzzle pieces. The current progression of things suggests the future of popular culture will place novelty on the translation of the "worthy" into a material, rather than attempting to rationalize that worthiness from the endless multitude of material bases.

We began with Groys's observation that culture is a society of spectacle without spectators. The progression and development of our culture then foreshadows a disintegration of spectacle and the introduction of the spectator's contemplative agency. Massumi (1987) transitions this into what I think is important to discuss next: "We breathe an ether of floating images that no longer bear a relation to any reality whatsoever. That, according to Baudrillard, is simulation: the substitution of signs of the real for the real." If simulacrum is the substitution of signs of the real, for the real, then for art, the arrival of photography comes to mind. With the arrival of photography popular culture is no longer concerned with the object that a photo is of, but only the consumption of a photo as an object.

Contemporary art has evolved since then and a marker of such evolution is Cindy Sherman. The artist dresses up as women in film and then photographs herself. These simulacra are a mediation on women. Broken down, her works are photos of photos, of women of women in movies. The re-production of the images is extended so far that people don't even know what women she is portraying or what the original movie was that these women are from. To complicate things further, one doesn't even know what the real version of a woman is; all we are left with is the idea of a woman reproduced in images. To some women, these simulacra are so far removed from the real idea of a woman, but all society sees is these mediated versions and the simulacrum to them then is a woman. Therefore if we are, as Groys observed, a culture that is concerned only with the production of images instead of their contemplation, it is notable how influential simulacra are on our constructions of reality.

As a society who has a higher visual literacy than ever before due to our saturated media world, the idea of simulated reality is not new in popular culture. Most people know that advertisements of people driving in expensive

cars are only a simulation, as it seems obvious that not everyone can afford or want that affluent life style. In the past fictional photorealism might have been deceiving, but with the increase in fictional representations of life, our eyes are trained to recontextualize those texts. The future then will not be one of fictional representations, but one of simulations of fiction and the real — more so as our eyes will become trained to search for the real in the bombardment of simulacra. Liljegren (2013) observes the transition in contemporary art from passive production of simulacra to more highly engaging texts, which he calls “critical fiction.” It is this “critical fiction” that will be the notable mark of future popular culture.

First, it is necessary to examine influential antecedent artists to the projected evolution of popular culture’s future. Andy Warhol is famous for bridging a gap between pop culture and visual art. His soup cans were simulations of the real but contemporary art has gone much further than passive simulacra. Where Warhol’s works were aesthetically devoid and begged no interpretative engagement from the spectator, contemporary art works are moving into a simulated experience that does require participation and critical examination from a spectator (unlike Warhol’s spectacle). A contemporary artist like Thomas Demand; who unlike Warhol, as Liljegren explains “...strive[s] to blur the line between the real and the fictional by engaging the viewer with narrative elements.” Demand uses paper and cardboard to create hyperreal full-scale domestic interiors and then photographs them to simulate real rooms. Demand’s images give the illusion of the real and the characteristic of simulacra, but drawing on scenes from movies the artist draws in the spectator, encouraging her to construct an inherent story. Here, the importance of spectacle is diminishing, and will diminish even more so if works progress in this honorable direction because the audience participates in the creation of its meaning rather than acting as a passive receptacle paralyzed by control. Liljegren explains of Demand’s works, “ [they are] prompting reconsideration of the limits of fiction and reality.” This awareness is achieved through narrative elements inherent in the images. The metonym of narrative-driven contemporary art standing in as a part for the whole of pop culture then suggests the texts of the future will be devoid of fictitious spectacle. Instead texts will be engaging narratives. As Liljegren asserts, “It is this narrative strategy that signals the evolution in contemporary artistic practice from simulacrum to critical fiction.”

The popular culture of today will be recognized by future generations as a meaningless multitude of simulacra— digitally archived somewhere in the depths of the internet. This path is already hinted at through the current progression of things. Millennials do not recognize that many of their beloved television shows, internet memes, movies, and music are all simulations of baby boomer originals. Such originals sometimes cannot even be traced. However, contemporary art standing in for the whole of the pop culture suggests that we have plenty of control over the future of its path. Although it seems that contemporary art is laden with postmodern self-referential parody and superficial simulacra, this is

not our destiny as a culture. From the standpoint of Thomas Demand and Tobias Meyer, it is in the work of artists that already strive to alter that destiny, and isn't it the great works of art of our past that societies study to inform present culture?

We are increasingly becoming a global society. Already the West is seeing great influence from Asia in contemporary art, where individuals represented in landscape works do not "...appear to exert more control over his [or her] environment, quite the contrary. He [or she] appears perfectly content to be a minute, interdependent bit of a magnificent whole" (Jen, 2012). These values will unassumingly translate into the popular culture of the future. As Jen observed about the contemporary, "[c]ontrary to what Western creatives believe not all art proceeds from an independent, individualized self." We need not seek refuge in the Eastern aesthetic, but instead let ourselves be consumed by the remedy of pluralism, enlightenment, and oneness: all of which appears to be bubbling up from the unconsciousness of our culture and surfacing in the sphere of contemporary art. Future generations may not recognize most of our pop culture today. Before the beginnings of a paradigm shift, we seem to be leaving behind only the cynically postmodern, self-parodying texts, and trivial significations of the real we desire.

With the increasingly global influence of Eastern values in the future, people will be able to recontextualize all that our capitalist and postmodern tendencies have destroyed (as is homological to contemporary art). The future is increasingly technologically driven and the power and influence of simulated reality will indeed increase. However the projection of our current pluralistic culture into the future will only further the need to reconsider the texts of popular culture from a multitude of different cultural perspectives no matter how greatly removed from an original referent. This projects a future of pop culture that will indeed require the contemplation of meaning behind popular texts rather than the passive production and consumption of texts. The Everything-is-a-remix contemporary cannot survive into the future — just as we had the power to deconstruct everything as a culture we must speculate on that deconstruction, contemplate on our desire to build it back up again.

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