

A structure of relationships for reviewing course themes

Relations of art and artist....

- 1) to medium
- 2) to interpretation
(and the systems of interpretation called “the art world”)
- 3) to society
(and its spawn, mass culture)
- 4) to the means of production

Modern

ca. 1850-1950

- 1) an extreme consciousness of **medium**, a desire for medium-specificity or genre purity (painting should be about painting, sculpture about sculpture... “Art for art’s sake”) Important theorists: “the painting of modern life” France, late 19th century (Baudelaire, Manet); *counter-currents* in “primitive,” “Oriental,” “naïve” art (Champfleury, Dubuffet)

“Flatness and the delimitation of flatness” U.S., mid- 20th century (Greenberg)

Haunting the edge of art during the modern period: the print, the photograph, the film, the plastic reproduction, television, advertising
- 2) a belief in depth models of **interpretation**, e.g., there is a secret unconscious (Freud), there is a secret class ideology (Marx), there is a secret selfishness of capital (Horkheimer and Adorno)... the role of the artist/ critic/ art historian / viewer is to plumb these depths and “reveal” the sordid interior or lower depth (which revelation may liberate the reader).
- 3) a certainty that modern artists are always **alienated from society** (the melancholic temperament), prophets in the wilderness, *flâneurs*. Artists must strive to form the leading edge of culture – a progressive *avant-garde*.
- 4) a relation to industrial **production** – the slow conversion from artisanal hand production in favor of industrial, mechanical, or mass production, resulting in the paradoxical “freedom” of artisanal fine arts from patronage systems. These are still affiliated with capitalism by “an umbilical cord of gold” (Greenberg) – artist must establish market niche through originality that nonetheless relates to commodity capital by aestheticizing, framing, or rejecting its effects (from Duchampian readymade to Pop art’s ambivalent embrace).

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Postmodern

ca. 1970-1999[?]

- 1) **Medium becomes media:** an eclectic mixing of techniques, artwork morphing across text and image, performance and object, or installation combined with 'virtual' spaces of projection; a fascination for borderline genres and for mass media itself, the photographic suffusion of the pictorial field – the whole surfacing systems of circulation.
"I'm interested in the apparatus I'm being threaded through" (Robert Smithson, 1970)
- 2) **interpretation** proliferates: a collapse in depth models, an embrace of surface effects, "performativity" rather than "subconscious motivations"... an infiltration of the apparatus of interpretation by artists: artists writing criticism, artists acting as curators, artists opening "museums," curators making "installations," etc. Polysemy, no interpretation is final or "correct" for all time. Artists'/Viewers' subject positions are not as constrained.
- 3) art and artist as coextensive with culture. Artist *inside society*, working the system, eschewing artworld isolation in favor of mass circulation (if possible) – yet preserving a critical voice (which may not be the artist's!) placing responsibility on the viewer: "You believe in the divinity of the masterpiece" (Kruher, 1980s)
- 4) Post-industrial service or information economy, production no longer aimed at exchange value but at symbolic value (**reproduction rather than production**, society of spectacle) – artist must establish salience through discourse that is only barely distinguishable from the sign system of late capitalism

Pragmatic present?

from 2000

- 1) **Mediation:** digital convergence. Proliferation of filmic, photographic, video, and data visualization technologies, a displacement of text and discourse from wall label or academy/critical apparatus to "buzz," immersive, environmental, or oracular spectacles, particularly around the millennium itself (apocalyptic post 9-11): "The pillar on which pride did rest/ That tower lies now level, prone" [Matthew Barney]
- 2) depth models are still unavailable; **collapse of interpretive distance** in artistic *gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), yet simultaneously another sector of the art world stokes the furnace of "institutional critique" and surfaces interpretation itself as part of the system; "Your mediated motion" [Olafur Eliasson, Critical Art Ensemble]
- 3) negotiation of critical stance within the system produces effect of **absorption into society**; in effect, an absorption *of* society into artwork: we find total immersion into artifice and spectacle, but at the same time an emphasis on the viewer's consciousness of that immersion – e.g., not as mindless escape but *as* mindfully social
- 4) **reproductive production** similar to postmodern, but without the text (if possible), full participation in global economic system in which artworld, fashion world, status travel, entertainment industry (US largest export) all begin to merge.

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