

Postmodern Interdisciplinarity

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*Yes, you can make art out of anything if you put your mind to it.*¹

Yvonne Rainer

This paper will explore modes of art production in the postmodern environment. Here are several questions that will be discussed in this paper. What are the processes of art production in the postmodern world? How does my art practice fit into categories established by contemporary art discourse? How does global capitalism affect art production and the contemporary art discourse of the twenty-first century? How did the role of artists shift in postmodern society? To answer these questions, it is necessary to provide a framework for the term “postmodern” in the context that it will be used in this paper.

What is Postmodernism?

Madan Sarup suggests that the term “postmodern” is used and discussed about in many artistic, intellectual and academic fields in contemporary Western societies.² Sarup suggests that in understanding of a group of terms including “modernity,” “postmodernity,” “modernization” and “modernism” is necessary to talk about the term “postmodernism.”³ According to Sarup, the term modernity “implies the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world.”⁴ The notion of modernity was originated in the Renaissance period and was “defined in relation to Antiquity,” establishing social, economic and political structures in the West.⁵

Postmodernity is defined as the fragmentation of these social, economic and political systems that are associated with modernity.⁶ It is also considered to be a movement towards a post-industrial era. This poses a question: is postmodernity a continuation of modernity or a

¹ Yvonne Rainer. “Commencement Address.” *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 134.

² Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 129.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

radical shift away from it?⁷ Sarup explains that postmodernity focuses on diversity in terms of individual and social identity, suggesting that “the autonomous subject has been dispersed into a range of plural, polymorphous subject-positions inscribed within language.”⁸ Other conditions that are associated with the term postmodernity are “a pluralistic and open democracy,” “an awareness of contingency and ambivalence,” “universal consumerism,” and “pleasure principle.”⁹

These conditions are results and/ or consequences of “modernization.” The term refers the stages of social development under industrialization in the West, generating socio-economic changes through scientific and technological advancement.¹⁰ Modernization is driven by the expanding capitalist global market, which effects movements of capital and labor, urbanization, the formation of national states and mass political movements.¹¹

According to Sarup, modernization has to be distinguished from the term “modernism.” Modernism refers to the artistic movement consisting of “a particular set of cultural or aesthetic styles” originated around the turn of the twentieth century.¹² Sarup describes the term as follows:

Modernism developed in conscious opposition to classicism; it emphasized experimentation and the aim of finding an inner truth behind surface appearance... The basic features of modernism can be summarized as: an aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexiveness; a rejection of narrative structure in favour of simultaneity and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain, open-ended nature of reality; and the rejection of the notion of integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the Freudian “split” subject...¹³

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ Ibid., 131.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid..

¹³ Ibid.

As Sarup mentions, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is rather unclear because these characteristics of modernism are shared with definitions of the postmodernism as well. The term postmodernism is associated with an art movement under advanced capitalist conditions¹⁴. It originated in the 1960s among artists and critics in New York, and became a concern for European theorists in the 1970s.¹⁵ For example, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* by Jean-Francois Lyotard was published in 1979, questioning the notion of “the grand narratives,” which supported the idea that “progressive liberation of humanity through science, and the idea that philosophy can restore unity to learning and develop universally valid knowledge for humanity.”¹⁶ Postmodern theory questions and critiques the notion of universal knowledge and foundationalism.¹⁷ Lyotard also questions the source of knowledge itself—“who decides what knowledge is? Who knows what needs to be decided?”¹⁸

How did the postmodern theory affect the arts? One of the consequences was “the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life.”¹⁹ With the emergence of Conceptual Art, enabling the idea itself to be artwork, artists started exploring the outside of the “art world,” expanding the discourse to social, cultural, political, historical and economic issues. Another dominant critical theory within the postmodern paradigm is postcolonialism, which investigates the notion of the “other” in a historical and social context. It is also a critique of the power relationship between the West and “non-West”, tracing back what was left out in relation to the notion of the grand narrative. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading postcolonial critic, points out not only the importance of investigating what is left out in the narrative, but also the importance of understanding functions of narratives in general:

...I think what they [Jacques Derrida and Lyotard] are noticing is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

¹⁹ Ibid., 132.

that we cannot but narrate. So, it's not a question of waging war on narratives, but they're realizing that the impulse to narrate is not necessarily a solution to problems in the world. So, what they're interested in is looking at the limits of narration, looking at narrativity, making up stories that tell us, "This is history," or making up stories that tell us, "This is the programme to bring about social justice." They're looking at that in a certain way as symptomatic of the solution. We must work with them, but there are also problems. But the other problem also is that in a narrative, as you proceed along the narrative, the narrative takes on its own impetus as it were, so that one begins to see reality as non-narrated. One begins to say that it's not a narrative, it's the way things are.²⁰

Spivak provides insightful understanding for the nature and function of narratives from her deconstructivist perspective. This is a distinctive characteristic of postmodern discourse, which separates it from that of modernism.

Interdisciplinarity in the Postmodern Framework

Postmodernism and postcolonialism have established the foundation for more "comprehensive modes" of art production—interdisciplinary approaches to art making. The notion of "interdisciplinary approaches" can be traced back to 1947.²¹ "Area Studies" were established and funded by federal grants in order to develop the United State's military superiority during the Cold War with the Soviet Union.²²

To meet the demands of war, scholars of diverse disciplines were forced to pool their knowledge in frantic attempts to advise administrators and policy makers...The war also showed the need for trained personnel for most foreign areas...In these Army Specialized Training Programs and Civil Affairs Training Schools many professors had their first experience with curricula organized by area rather than by discipline, and many students made a real beginning in the study of foreign areas and in their languages...²³

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Post-modern Condition: The End of Politics?" (Geoffrey Hawthorn, Gayatri Spivak, Ron Aronson, Johan Dunn). *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*. Sarah Harasym (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 7. This passage is from the introduction to the "national conference on the study of world areas, which was held in New York on November 28-30, 1947.

Area studies and cultural studies played a key role in the establishment of interdisciplinarity in postmodern critical theory, are reflected in the works of a certain group of contemporary artists. In his article, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” Hal Foster suggests a new paradigm, “the artist as ethnographer” within postmodern art discourse.²⁴ Foster mentions Anne and Patrick Poirier and Charles Simonds as examples of artists whose works reflect anthropological and archaeological approaches to art making.²⁵ Although Foster introduces the notion of this new paradigm within the framework of contemporary art discourse, he is skeptical about the validity of interdisciplinarity, which is an intrinsic element of the artist as ethnographer paradigm.

Charles Gaines points out in his text “Note from the Editor” that the notion of interdisciplinarity has been misdefined as “a lack of discipline” in contemporary art criticism.²⁶ Gaines refers to the article, “Artforum-ism, or the Mythical Andy Warhol” (1999) written by Juli Carson, as a reflection of this confusion created by the new mode of art production stemming the merger of “two distinctive areas of academic discourse: interdisciplinarity and cultural studies.”²⁷ Gaines disagrees with Carson’s claim of interdisciplinarity as a lack of discipline:

Carson links cultural studies together with the new “interdisciplinarity”—lacking in discipline—and, by doing so, defines cultural studies as populist. But this conflation reveals a hidden agenda within her critique. Carson’s argument dismisses the idea held by many cultural theorists that issue of identity and differences are ideologically dismissed by those disciplines that traditionally control the production of knowledge. The defense of “disciplines” appeals to the interests of writers who are invested in “high art” and runs contrary to the interests of artists who wish to

²⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 172.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 182

²⁶ Charles Gaines, “Note from the Editor.” *Yard*. (Los Angeles) no.1. Fall 2004, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

produce in a less fettered environment.²⁸

Gaines points out a split within the contemporary art discourse—practicing artists vs. the rest of the professional art world, including curators, critics and art historians. By defending their own professional territories, curators, critics and art historians are unable to obtain proper tools to observe the complexity of artistic production in the interdisciplinary era. It seems that a formulation of the “new” art history is crucial. Otherwise, this gap will only be widen, and a “killing of the author” paradigm, suggested by Dave Hickey, will be the norm in art discourse.²⁹

In addition, the complexity associated with art work produced in an interdisciplinary environment is even more complex now under globalization. Twenty-first century capitalism is escalating the speed of globalization to the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish between global and local. To put it in a postcolonial framework, it is an era of hybridity. In her book, *The Death of a Discipline*, Spivak quotes Toby Alice Volkman to address issues of hybridity and interdisciplinarity:

Recent developments have challenged some of the premises of area studies itself. The notion, for example, that the world can be divided into knowable, self-contained “areas” has come into question as more attention has been paid to movements between areas. Demographic shifts, diasporas, labor migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization have encouraged a more subtle and sensitive reading of areas’ identity and composition.³⁰

The notions of hybridity and interdisciplinarity have become fundamental to the discourse of postmodern art production in relation to social, political, economical and cultural conditions.

²⁸ Gaines, 1.

²⁹ Based on a comment Dave Hickey made during his lecture for Art Symposium at UCSB on February 23, 2005. “Killing of the author” was defined as the deletion of any pertinent information about an artist and his/ her work in interpreting a work of art (by curators, critics and art historians).

³⁰ Toby Alice Volkman, *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies*. (New York: Ford Foundation, 1999), ix. Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 2-3.

They are also crucial concepts that provide a framework for my work as well. The second half of this paper will illustrate how my artwork could be placed within postmodern art discourse.

Postmodernism and My Work

My recent series of mixed-media collages came out of my “everyday life” experiences during my trip back to Japan this past summer. I was there for three weeks visiting my parents who live in Osaka. While I was there, I had a set of everyday experiences completely different from my life in America. My daily choices were built around different sets of routines, foods, transportations, people and expectations.

During this trip, I saved as many printed materials as possible: maps, flyers, coupons, tickets, pages from magazines, receipts, junk mail and so on. These ubiquitous things were the basis for this series of collages. They were traces of where I went, what I saw, what I ate, what I read, what I bought and what I thought. Although these pieces seem very personal, I believe that they are reflections of something larger than myself—a cultural memory and a glimpse of the social and cultural structures that create an individual's identity in Japan. This also reflects the intersection of art and everyday life, which is one of the dominant characteristics of postmodern art practice.

What I have realized through this experience is that I can no longer consider myself a “Japanese” person when I am in Japan. I don’t look like them, think like them nor do I behave like them. Their priorities and values differ from mine, and I am interested in understanding the origins of these differences. The notion of “difference” in relation to the issue of identity has become very important for me to address through my work. It is this notion of difference that is the foundation of the power structures in which we all live.

Now, what does the term “difference” mean in this context? What is this difference based on? How does one differentiate and categorize the notions of “Japanese” and “American” qualities? My cultural, social and economic identity is “in-between” Japan and the United

States. In order to claim that, I have to be able to define differences between two identities; however, it seems impossible to have a clear-cut answer to this. An attempt to locate the notion of Japanese identity is to realize how it is heavily influenced by American politics and culture under the structures created by global capitalism. It is impossible to separate American influence from Japanese cultural and political identity since 1945. Placed within the postcolonial framework, contemporary Japan reflects the notion of cultural, social, economic and political hybridity, creating a new identity through transmutations of two distinctive cultures. It is clear that the thought process is submerged under postmodern conditions.

In his article, *Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art*, James Meyer analyzes the field of contemporary nomadism in to two categories: lyrical and critical.³¹ I will limit my argument to critical nomadism since it is more appropriate for this paper. Meyer defines critical nomadism as that which “does not enact or record an action or movement for the spectator’s delectation, so much as locate travel itself within historical and institutional frameworks.”³² Many immigrants and diasporas, including myself, experience this phenomenon on an everyday basis in the “foreign” countries in which they live. One cannot not see historical and institutional structures in everyday life. In addition, after living in the “foreign” country for a period of time, your native country becomes the secondary “foreign” country. The romantic idea of a “home country” remains, but the distinction between “foreign” and “home” countries becomes blurred and transmuted. This blurred identity rejects the traditional approach to the notion of differences and identities, and it questions the idea of national identity in the twenty-first century. My personal experience as a first-generation immigrant in the United States is a strong influence on what I intend to communicate through my work.

³¹ James Meyer, “Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art.” *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*. Alex Coles (ed.), *de-, dis-, ex-*. vol 4 , (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2002), 11.

³² *Ibid.*

Postmodernism and the Roles of Artists

It has been fifty years since the notion of postmodernism dominated contemporary art discourse. How can one “rethink” postmodernism now? What are the roles of artists in postmodern interdisciplinarity? Within the realm of postmodern critical theory, one is required to re-define every aspect of life and place the notion of “present” in a context of historical development. The questioning and analyzing of contemporary art discourse in relation to society is one of the viable roles for artists. It seems that questioning does not necessary lead to the answer anymore but poses new questions due to the complexity of the postmodern global world.

Addressing the idea of oppositionality is one form of questioning and analyzing the existing art discourse and institutional structures built around it. Judith Barry suggests, “For me, the question becomes not how to oppose the ‘dominant cultures,’ whatever they may be and however they may constitute their aims, but instead, how to effect and transform the institutions that shape these dominant discourses.”³³ Barry also addresses the challenge that socially responsible artists face:

While it is true that “life-style” issues revolving around the wealth and fame of a few mostly apolitical artists have increased the visibility of the art world, this has served to render cultural production in the same terms as popular culture—easily exhausted and consumed. Popular culture has changed the art world, but the art world has not had a significant effect on popular culture.³⁴

This co-existence of populist and alternative art productions creates tensions within the art world, and this conflict seems to be even more obvious now under the corporatization of museum and gallery operations. One of the exhibitions which addressed this issue in an innovative manner was *Uncommon Sense* (1996) at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Tom Finkelpearl, one of curators of the exhibition, states the followings:

Uncommon Sense addresses an art of attraction, an essentially anti-

³³ Judith Barry, “Critical Forums: The Organization of Oppositionality.” (Judith Barry, Papo Colo, David Deitcher, Isabelle Graw, Brian Wallis, Dan Walworth, Fred Wilson). *Acme Journal*. (New York) vol 1, no.2, 1992, 13.

³⁴ Ibid.

abstract art that seeks to draw people together. The “pulling away” of modernism has led to the abstracted isolated site of the museum, the disengagement of the artist from everyday life, and perhaps more importantly, a series of physical separation in the organic structure of the city.³⁵

In dialogue with Finkelppearl’s statement, co-curator Julie Lazar outlines her social activist approach to her curatorial practice:

How can MOCA have a more consistent working and creative bond with the city? With artists? With audiences? How can the museum be more of a free space[?]. . . How can museums provide a context where dialogues between artists and audiences are about the creative process and the ways in which contemporary art interpenetrates with other aspects of culture? How can people—within and related to the museum setting—establish worthwhile associations among those who are unaffiliated with art?³⁶

These are the questions that I would like to address in my work and in defining my role as an artist in a larger context. At a time when museums are more inclined to develop structures for art exhibitions with “entertainment” value, these issues raised by Lazar become crucial in sustaining critical art discourse. Continuous dialogues and relationships created through them is part of art production, and it is one of the most valuable and rewarding experiences that one can have as an artist. Through this process, I hope to produce works that are critical and thought-provoking in order to give a new perspective on our everyday lives.

³⁵ Tom Finkelppearl, *Uncommon Sense: Essay by Tom Finkelppearl, Julie Lazar, Marita Sturken*. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997), 15.

³⁶ Julie Lazar, *Uncommon Sense: Essay by Tom Finkelppearl, Julie Lazar, Marita Sturken*. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997), 38.

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