

Life Purpose

"Coping with Postmodernity"

By C. Andrews.

Note from Founder

Postmodernity is a term which I feel sums up the present environment we are dealing with: in business, society, relationships and art. C. Andrews, who is both an artist and English teacher, shares his insights into Postmodernity. I believe we can all learn how to integrate our purpose into this Postmodern World through a better understanding, upon which C. Andrews helps shed light.

Coping with Postmodernity

Part I: Art in a Postmodern World

I.

This series shall, I hope, explore some ways in which postmodernism manifests itself in contemporary life and will also show how our resistance to postmodern theory may sabotage our efforts to lead meaningful lives. Before I begin, I wish to concede that postmodern, postmodernism, and postmodernity are ambiguous terms, but the very fact that postmodernism is difficult to define is postmodern itself. Postmodernism is the name we give the theory; postmodernity is the *condition* of postmodernism; postmodern is an *adjective* modifying something that aligns with postmodernism. I could, perhaps, begin to define postmodernism by presenting a series of contraries. Postmodernism is about:

chaos		order
ambiguity		clarity
skepticism		idealism
conflict		resolution
vastness	versus	containment
disorientation		stability
questions		answers
fragmentation		totality
confusion		predictability

I would also like to add to my list Ihab Hassan's first seven oppositions between modernism and postmodern:

<i>modernism</i>	<i>postmodernism</i>
romanticism	paraphysics
form (conjunctive, closed)	antiform (disjunctive, open)
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy
mastery/logos	exhaustion/silence
art object/finished work	process/performance/happening

I could go on, but for now let us sum up with Lester Faigley's contention that postmodernism, rather than maintaining an oppositional stance to the status quo, embraces innovation and experimentation--at an ever increasing rate of turnover (7).

The problem Western Civilization may feel in trying to cope with postmodernity is that the ground

beneath us is shifting so greatly and so quickly that there is nary a position upon which we can hook our anchors. The postmodern person argues that all models of meaning, all orders, all paradigms are mere constructs, vulnerable to dissolution when the next tidal wave of knowledge wipes out and invalidates (or relegates to the status of *theory*) what was previously held as truth. Above all, the one model of meaning westerners have held most dear since the Enlightenment has been the construct of the personal self--a construct held in suspicion by postmodern thinkers. As Faigley states, "Postmodern theory questions the existence of a rational, coherent self and the ability of the self to have privileged insight into its own processes. Postmodern theory denies that the self has universal and transcendent qualities but instead renders our knowledge of the self as always contingent and always partial" (111). Thus, dissonance arises for many of us today as we base our perceptions on an Age-of-Enlightenment model that often fails to align with or explain the actual reality we witness around us. When events in life shock us and hidden realities are revealed, cracks begin to appear in our ideas about what is true. A sort of postmodern epiphany may ensue, and the result can be debilitating if we insist on trying to force the world to keep conforming to our preconceptions. Understanding and acceptance of postmodernity can help to relieve our suffering and may indeed free us to pursue our aspirations--albeit perhaps in a new direction. That is to say, if we see the wall in front of us, then we can stop banging our heads against it, even if we cannot make it go away.

"Opposition toward what is incomprehensible blocks our spirits and our intellects from growing." - C. Andrews

Below, I aim to show how learning to appreciate modern art that may confuse us can sometimes lead us toward a more open, more abundant view of the aesthetic aspects of our culture. Opposition toward what is incomprehensible blocks our spirits and our intellects from growing. Moreover, I hope to show that our culture's preference for literalistic, representational art limits the individual and society's ability to cope in a postmodern world.

II.

First of all, what is modern art? In point of fact, it is perhaps too broad a term to be helpful, comprised of an entire lexicon of -isms. For me, modern art begins with impressionism, which marks a move away from literalistic representation of reality. But it was not impressionism itself that launched what would follow (for as a style it begins and ends at the same place) but rather a painter who stood somewhat apart from the principal impressionists and their Parisian market in the late 1800's: Cézanne, who felt he was born too soon to witness the ensuing dream of art (Harris 77). Not long after his death in 1906, Cézanne would be cited by legions of 20th century painters as the artist who opened the door; for one thing, how could cubism have been possible had not Cézanne first broken ground--or, rather, broken the canvas into separate planes of color?

But if Cézanne was the father of modern art, who are his descendants? Of course, we can see how cubism evolved from Cézanne and perhaps even how the Fauvists evolved from the post-impressionistic, exuberant colors of, say, a Van Gogh--but it is probably not until about 1910 when the recognizable object vanished from painting. (Most are willing to credit Kandinsky with the first non-objective foray, in his famous watercolor of that year.) Thus, we can see a tree of abstraction extending from the roots of Kandinsky and Mondrian to the varied branches of style we see in the abstract expressionists immediately following the war and extending into the 1950's: Franz Kline's vigorous minimalism, which for me takes Mondrian's grids to the next step; Pollock's "all-over" canvases *sans* brushstroke, paintings which pushed the envelope of technique and subject but which, finally, arrived at a dead end; Rothko's ambiguously bordered, shimmering patchwork rectangles (which evoke a debt to some of Klee's treatments of watercolors); and the indefinite anthropomorphic intertwining forms of de Kooning and Gorky.

Meanwhile, the first half of the century also saw a body of art which sprang not from preceding influences so much as from philosophical (especially Freudian) antecedents; that is, the surrealism of de Chirico, Dali, Magritte, and others, as well as the dadaism of Duchamp. Certainly, surrealism (and its less psychological, more spiritual sister--the magic realism we see in Latin American traditions) maintains a reliance on recognizable objects but surrealism puts those objects into unexpected and sometimes shocking contexts--hence the Freudian aspect. And then there are

those such as Miro, whose antecedents overlap, who are so unique that their work becomes as recognizable as the first three notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Art critics often categorize Miro as a surrealist painter, yet he transcends his fellow Spaniards (Picasso and Dali) by refining objects from the world into his own lexicon of symbols. Classification also fails in the case of someone such as Kurt Schwitters, whose assemblages evoke cubism, dadaism, surrealism, even realism in the realness of the found objects themselves--and all the while his work seems subtly prophetic of pop art, including the mixed media pieces produced by Rauschenberg.

In many instances, new ideas in art result as a backlash to previous ideas or because the current status quo cannot be taken further and its possibilities are exhausted. Interestingly, the rise of non-objective painting (i.e., what many people call "abstract" art) would lead to an emphasis on two dimensionality, with the flat surface of the canvas itself often the principal subject as it were. Perspective (what Hockney calls "the tyranny of the vanishing point") became irrelevant. Why did non-objective painting evolve to focus so much on this flatness of the picture surface? After all, with the rise of the Italian high Renaissance, a painting or fresco could only be considered successful if its creator had mastered the illusion of depth. If we look at the status quo that spawned non-objective art, we see the way in which cubism exhausted the possibilities of depicting three dimensions on canvas; cubism does not settle for the illusion of depth but rather shows us all sides of an object at the same time--something even the naked eye cannot achieve. It became, therefore, impossible to take three dimensions any further on the canvas. What, then, could be a more natural reaction to cubism than the non-objective emphasis on flatness which would reach its apotheosis in the abstract expressionists?

But as non-objective painting ran its course through the abstract expressionists after World War II, it became the status quo itself--it became the background to which the new generation of artists would have to react. The result? Pop art, which, as might be expected, swung the pendulum of representation as far as possible in the opposite direction. In pop art, with its images culled from media that surround us (billboards, newspapers, and shopping aisles), it often proved challenging to differentiate between the artwork and the subject itself. The blurring of the distinction reminds me of Magritte's painting of a pipe with the words (in French) at the bottom: "This is not a pipe." For many in the masses, a silk-screened Campbell's soup can on a Warhol canvas seemed mystifying in its apparent lack of subjectivity. Pop art abandons the abstract expressionist preoccupation with subjectivity--the glory of all those artistic choices! Those bold brush strokes! Those emotional spatters!--and turns to an emphasis on the object, the sign itself, usually a sign so mundane or which so permeates our culture that it elicits a stock reaction to an imperative as automatic as our foot moving onto a brake pedal when we see a red octagon. However, pop art was not immune from having its edges blurred. Is a Claes Oldenburg sculpture of a giant toothpaste tube surreal or pop art, or both? Jasper Johns, perhaps the most inventive and philosophical of all the so-called pop artists, merely used the popular or mundane image (notably the American flag, numerals, and targets) to create painterly statements not about those images themselves but about the way we culturally look at those images. And in Rauschenberg, who has perhaps held up best from that generation, we again see stock images as mere starting points that lead to more subjective results.

Pop art, after the 60's, would give way to postmodernism, a leveling of the field where anything goes; all bets are off; nothing is stable. It is a good time now to be an artist. The range of possibilities for canvas painting has been so utterly exhausted that now an artist is totally free to paint any subject in any style in an environment so saturated with influences that canvases painted today can be associated with any previous period. On the other hand, some artists perhaps find the postmodern landscape so fraught with intimidating influences that they have abandoned canvas painting altogether as a medium that is dead--hence the rise of conceptual art, from performances to large installations in which the venue of the work itself becomes part of the work. Conceptual art epitomizes postmodernity in that it is almost always ephemeral in nature. (One could argue that all art is ephemeral, but the impermanence of a Christo landscape installation almost seems to flaunt its blithe lack of concern about its future demise. Contrast this with the attitude of the fresco painter of the Renaissance, whose pigments permanently became imbedded in the walls which they adorned.)

III.

It is human nature--or at least the nature of Westerners--that when confronted with some product of human expression--be it a painting, a poem, a movie, or anything else that conveys a message--we want to know what it means. The first emotional response when a person cannot infer the meaning of a painting may be to throw hands into the air and mutter, "Enough! Yet another sham piece of 'modern art.'" Some might say that the creators, purveyors, and sympathizers of so-called modern art are in fact cultural elitists whose claim to comprehend the meaning of incomprehensible rubbish is a club that the over-educated use to wield power over the less educated.

Of course, there are plenty of highly educated people who like *kitsch* (a German word meaning "pretentious bad taste, especially in the arts"). And there are those who never sat in an art class but who love non-objective art. However, it is not a sweeping generalization to say that most Americans, at least, prefer representational artwork; people would generally rather view a painting of a discernible landscape than a Sam Francis canvas covered with seemingly meaningless drips and spatters of colorful paints. I have heard students laughing about going on museum field trips and viewing paintings that were just "droplets of paint. Any pre-school kid could have done that." In short, people who bear indifference or disdain toward modern art may think that those who appreciate it are silly, foolish, or pretentious. For them, an abstract painting is "junk." On the other hand, I find myself adoring much great non-objective (or "abstract") and expressionistic art of the last century and have to fight to resist denigrating the masses' taste in representational or traditional art as provincial, unsophisticated, ignorant, and cheap. As I write this, thoughts about the king of *kitsch*, Thomas Kinkade, are unavoidable.

Who is Thomas Kinkade? His commercial galleries have been appearing in shopping malls throughout California (and I assume elsewhere). His works are usually renderings of English rural scenes--heavy on flowery gardens with lots of misty green and lilac colors foregrounding the distant English thatched cottage with sparkling brooks along the way. He creates these paintings, which are then replicated in assembly-line fashion by anonymous workers. I do not know where his production takes place, but a Taiwanese sweat shop would not surprise me. (A great deal of art--in hotels, in furniture showrooms, in interior decorators' catalogs--is produced in this assembly-line fashion and usually sold for far more retail dollars than the average artist can hope to garner from an original work from his hand.) Kinkade's mass produced paintings are not sold inexpensively (often costing hundreds if not thousands of dollars), and their purchasers are probably quite proud. No doubt many people feel a soothing calm when viewing a Kinkade scene; for my own part, not loathing but indifference is the reaction--an indifference I experience whenever I see something contrived and soulless. To me, a Kinkade is not art but *kitsch* dripping with the same syrupy sweet sentimentality contained in a Hallmark greeting card poem, embellished with sparkling glitter and embossed fuzzy teddy bears. Kinkade is notable merely because he is just one of a slew of currently popular people making a lot of money selling reproduced images to the masses as if reproductions have any value at all. In the 1980's the rage was to own a large Patrick Nagel serigraph of a cold looking female rendered in solid shades of mostly blacks, whites, and grays. Now it's Kinkade. It's art as fashion statement and owning a piece is like shopping for clothing cut to the latest style. Of course, there was a time when a lot of this was being said about Warhol.

In their own way Kinkade's canvases are far removed from objective reality (they're fairy tale landscapes). So we cannot fairly measure him against a rubric which emphasizes true to life realism. How do we judge him and with what scoring guide? Is there not a point at which something must finally be judged absolutely lousy. How can the sophisticated museum visitor ever be trained to appreciate a lousy Kinkade? How can a person who expects to see traditional and sentimentalized subjects in art ever learn how to like the absence of subject matter in a black and white Franz Kline painting? The appreciation of art is subjective to the point that it becomes very difficult to explain to the uninitiated just why and how Jackson Pollock (most famous for his large canvases covered with webs of dripped paint) was one of the greatest American talents in the years immediately following World War II. How can one converse with the person who says "any child could have done that"? This dilemma epitomizes the failure of minds to meet that is so typical of postmodernity. We all expect people who are like us to appreciate the same things we do. When they do not "there is no accounting for taste." Postmodernism exists when we feel like we are having cultural clashes with people in our own culture. Or, a postmodernist might even say that the idea of a unified culture--a body of people with shared ideas, tastes, and frames of reference--is a construct that can never actually exist. But the one thing that we probably all still have in common

is the expectation of meaning. Regardless of our tastes, we all at some point expect art to mean something, at least to represent an idea. The masses shy away from non-objective art, however, because it refuses to represent those things labeled by nouns: persons, places, things. More often than not, non-objective art is about verbs (the actions of the artist). And, as any linguist will attest, the most important components of language are verbs, which is why I think it is imperative to move toward a broader appreciation of nonrepresentational art; imagine trying to think without using verbs and the importance of this becomes clear. Furthermore, is not all artwork a species of language, at least metaphorically? (Cubism and pop art are especially notable in artists' willingness to incorporate actual text into the artwork.) When we view a representational painting--say a traditional still life--our minds automatically go into a literalistic mode of labeling objects--there is an apple; there is the wine bottle; those are the grapes--and our appreciation only shifts to the artist's soulful act of painting incidentally or secondarily. Non-objective art forces us to look at something without naming it, and this is extremely healthy--and postmodern. As in Hassan's seventh opposition between modernism and postmodernism, the meaning of art evolves so that the process of creation transcends the finished work.

More often than not, western civilization's approach to meaning boils down to the dichotomy of subject and object. We cannot discuss these terms without a great deal of simplification, so let us just review how these terms are used rather than grope for precise definitions. The *subject* of a work is the thing it is about. The *objective* is the intended outcome or result of the work. For example, in Edward Hopper's famous *Nighthawks*, we could argue that the subject is the interior of a cafe on an empty street late at night. The objective is for the painting to impart a sense of loneliness, mystery or isolation in the viewer. *Object* is used in another way when we say a painting is *non-objective*, in which case we mean there are no recognizable objects being depicted in the image (no apple, no wine bottle, no grapes). Typically, most of us westerners approach human expression taking objects (in both senses of the word) for granted; it's the subject that interests us. This tends to lead us to oversimplifying, generalizing, and categorizing the meanings of reality into stock, absolute blacks and whites. A person will read the twenty-third Psalm and say it is about finding strength in the Lord. A person will say that Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is about the dilemma of choosing country over friend. And that same person will say that *Nighthawks* is a painting about lonely people who should be home sleeping next to a loved one. But isn't there a lot more meaning to be found in all these works? Interpreting the subject matter of any human expression can never be finished, can never be better than partial. That's what a postmodernist would say. Again, though, that is not the nature of most westerners. We want to know what something is about. We want to know the subject.

In the postmodern world, the subject *becomes* the object, or at least the object is seen with greater potency than the subject. Grammatically, try to imagine inverting the object and the subject. The object would come before the verb, the subject last. Jean Baudrillard writes:

We have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object. It is the subject that makes history, it's the subject that totalizes the world. . . Who has ever sensed the foreboding of the particular and sovereign potency of the object? In our philosophy of desire, the subject retains absolute privilege since it is the subject that desires. But everything is inverted if one passes on to the thought of seduction. There it's no longer the subject which desires, it's the object which seduces. Everything comes from the object and everything returns to it, just as everything started with seduction, not with desire. (111)

In painting, this idea applies as follows: imagine the focus of the artist attempting to depict a bowl of cherries. The painter makes all decisions--makes each brush stroke, places every tiny gob of paint--to create the illusion on canvas that we are seeing the cherries in the bowl. Now imagine Picasso, preparing to paint *Les cerises*, squirting onto a palette the oil colors he will use--a limited range of cadmium red, viridian green, titanium white, yellow, and Payne's gray. He makes some dozen or so circles in red, white, black, and pink tones; makes some dark viridian arcs for the stems. We cannot tell if the dark slashes surrounding the group of circles are supposed to indicate a vase or a bowl, and whether the ambiguous container is made of glass or pewter. Broad, heavy brush strokes indicate, apparently, where a shadow would be. All of this floats on a yellowish space, with no surface, no table top indicated. At first glance, cherries might not even come to mind when we view the painting. But Picasso isn't enslaved to the subject of cherries. He is interested in

each of those brush strokes and their outcome--their effect on us. He is uncovering the painting's objects, and I am using both senses of the word. His is a postmodern painting and it illustrates Baudrillard's claim. Picasso has transformed our desire to look at cherries into a seduction by the brush strokes to focus on the painter's hand. Now we are not looking at cherries but at a painting. Our point of view has totally shifted. Now we are connected to another human mind, the one whose hand controlled the paint brush, whose fossilized imprints still bear witness in the impastoed ridges and valleys of un-thinned oil paints. It's the same phenomenon we love in a Van Gogh, but with less reliance on subject.

Today, looking back on all the modern art I have seen hanging in museums, I think of another great Dutch painter, Willem de Kooning, who reached the zenith of postmodern talent. Best known for his series of paintings and drawings of women, de Kooning's images are fraught with ambiguity; we see the flesh tone of the woman's skin and her exaggerated eyes, but that little squiggle of pink--is it a finger tip? a bit of genitalia? Is that dark line the crease of an armpit or is it something in the background? None of it looks accidental. Rarely will de Kooning allow us all to agree on exactly what we are seeing--and in this he epitomizes postmodernity. And in this his canvases become more and more beautiful as they unfold their meanings to us, just as life itself will become if we choose to view it in this way.

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