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## ***Diversity in American Art from 1975 to the Present***

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The visual arts have diversified to an unprecedented degree in the last quarter of the century and this is nowhere more evident than in the American scene. The present multiplicity of approaches to both materials and conceptions would seem to defy the notion of a unified framework for works as varied as those displayed in this current exhibition. The familiar traditions of the fine arts - seen in Nicholas Africano's delicate paint on canvas and Joel Shapiro's cast metal - sit next to Shigeo Kubota's video projections, Mike Kelley's stuffed animals, and David Hammons' recycled refuse from the streets of urban and suburban landscapes. Has the art world become so eclectic and miscellaneous that anything goes? Are there no standards or values that hold true across the board? Do the trends of artistic fashion change with the whim of each succeeding season in a constant craving for novelty? Or does the development of a widely heterogeneous arena of production signal something profound about the visual arts as a contemporary cultural activity? Looking at representative works from this apparently exploded field, it may be possible to sketch the shape of the changes observed during the last two decades and to tease out, if not unifying conceptual parameters, at least a coherent critical framework. The 1970s are generally considered the decade in which stylistic diversity became so conspicuous that it is impossible to impose the usual art historical "periodization". Of course, this is often difficult, especially in the modern period. It's almost as difficult to imagine that Duchamp's *Fontaine* (1917) is contemporary with Marc Chagall's lyrical canvases, or that Picasso's *Guernica* is of the same moment as Mondrian's distilled abstraction, as it is to imagine Jackie Winsor's wood and hemp works falling under the same rubric of "contemporary sculpture" that includes the fetishistic figures of Alison Saar and the patina perfect pieces of Nancy Graves. It's easy enough to say that these are works whose differences and distinctions function to define each other by productively meaningful contrasts - that the "natural roughness" of Winsor's *Bound Logs* (1972-1973) serves as a referential foil for the "artificial finish" of Graves' *Cantilever* completed a decade later. But the contrasts are not merely at the level of material, or style, or theme, or even iconography. And looking closer, one begins to have the sneaking suspicion that works produced in the spirit of minimalist aesthetics or from a politically motivated urgency or through a critical engagement with popular culture no longer share any continuous ground of connection that serves to define or differentiate one from the other. It seems that Alison Saar's use of nails, tin, and copper, worked into a figurative form in *Skin/Deep* (1993), cannot belong to the same universe of "metalwork" which contains Carl Andre's copper plates laid end to end, any more than it can to the universe of "figures" represented by Jonathan Borofsky's *Running People at 2,616,216* (1979). The very notions of artistic work, of production, of figurative value and identity, and of cultural associations with form and process are so disparate that only the critical concept of heterology - of things so conceptually diverse they can not exist within a single framework - seems an apt way to consider the fragmented field of visual art from the 1970s onward. Or does it? With a bit of perspective, the logical relations among these works can be understood in relation to changes that have taken place during the last twenty years or so both in the culture of the

art world and in the larger social sphere to which it belongs. In art-world terms, this is the period that witnesses the dramatic demise of Modernism as the basis of artistic production and of the critical discussion used to apprehend it. Driven by the twin engines of formal innovation and the utopian vision of the avant-garde, Modernism certainly contained a wide array of visual styles, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century. But by mid-century, many of these styles had been pushed to the margins by a dominant concept of modern art in which abstraction was considered the ultimate aesthetic expression. Although many critical agendas are attached to abstraction - from a politics of negation to an ideology of uninhibited individualism - abstract art established one crucial concept in the minds of those raised to appreciate its formal virtues: the idea that the meaning of a work of art should be evident in its visual form. Whether as an instrument for bringing about a radical change of consciousness for revealing sublime and universal truths, visual form was granted an unprecedented level of autonomy and power within the modern aesthetic.

This faith in the capacity of works of art to communicate directly through an otherwise unmediated aesthetic experience (in modernism's self-sufficient presence, to state it in critical terms) starts to crumble in the 1950s and 1960s. Artists involved in Fluxus, Situationism, Happenings, Gutai, and other groups in the international sphere place increasing emphasis on events and experience, rather than objects, as the primary aspect of artistic activity. As they do so, these artists begin to demonstrate that the meaning of a work of art must be constituted from a dispersed field which extends from the artist's personal life to the community, from the realm of mass media and popular culture to the topical domains of immediate politics and the issue oriented moments of activist rhetoric. If Modernism's identity up to and through the middle of the twentieth century can be understood in relation to the idea of *autonomy* (of self-sufficient works, functioning independently of their context, with readily apparent meaning based in their form) then the art that proliferates in the later twentieth century can be broadly defined by the concept of *contingency*. Scholars and critics have gradually abandoned the idea that any work of art reveals itself entirely through its visual means, and now contemporary artists have made the complex web of social, personal, cultural, and historical interconnections a conspicuous formal feature of much of their work - not just an aspect of the way context must be brought to bear on the work in order for it to be fully understood.

An exemplary piece of critical interrogation in this regard is Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, made in the mid 1970s. Rosler interrogates the modernist aesthetic sensibility by showing that neither visual images - with their apparent capacity to document a scene or social circumstance - nor verbal language - with its seemingly accurate transfer of information - can communicate adequately the nexus of power relations, social spheres, and individual lives which are in fact being concealed by these "descriptive" forms of representation. Rosler forces the realization that nothing is without precedent or context, nothing is without resonance or connections, and that the meaning of every work of art is forged at the intersection of social and aesthetic spheres. In short, there is no formal value distinct from the cultural network within which that value is produced. The historical processes which brought about this change are embedded in cultural transformations. In the 1960s and 1970s, the artworld experienced significant shifts of power from center to margins: the elitist enclaves of the high art establishment were broken open through a series of systematic and strategic attacks by women and minority artists. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the antiwar protests mark three waves of assault on the mainstream status quo within American society. The civil rights movement laid the foundation for both increased professional visibility, self-determination, and foregrounded identity for visual artists of color, even if art by those artists or about those crucial events was not widely exhibited by mainstream institutions during that period. The women's art movement - comprising many activist artists only loosely linked

in a formal sense - forced open both the formal and conceptual boundaries of the establishment.<sup>1</sup> All manner of subject matter, themes, motifs, ways of working, materials, traditions, and sensibilities suddenly had to be considered within the domain of the world of art. This change cannot be underestimated: women artists such as Jackie Winsor demanded a professional identity as well as recognition of their work; Lynda Benglis inflected the materials of a formal practice with feminist associations, giving her strongly twisted knots a decorative surface that flew in the face of good-taste Formalism, and Ana Mendieta infused the field of visual arts with personal meaning and traditional modes, offering an unprecedented challenge to the idea of the work of autonomous art whose formal properties were its sole and supreme carriers of meaning. The imprint of Mendieta's body into the earth inscribed a personal image in primal and essential terms, terms laden with cultural values that associate organic materials with femininity.

The crisis of conscience and power that artists experienced during the Vietnam war showed once and for all the impotence of abstract formal language as a force for social change. The poverty of abstraction to act in the face of real crises punctures the modernist belief system. It becomes impossible to imagine that any visual form which is merely an attack on or transformation of the established codes of visual meaning will bring about any kind of social change - let alone the long dreamed of modern Utopia. The paintings of Leon Golub - figurative, specific, suggestive, and yet shifting in the space between historical document and universal situations of human conflict - operate as exemplary instances of contingent work. At once legible and irreducible to a simple reading of their iconography, they vibrate between fixed and unfixable meaning - the references they invoke change depending on the year, the week, the time of day, the viewer, the location in which they are viewed, the latest newspaper headlines or news bulletin. But one has only to put Golub's work into relation to that of Robert Colescott, an African-American painter whose use of figural language contains a completely different critical agenda, to begin to realize the extent to which representational painting participates in the larger transformation from autonomous to contingent work while also being part of larger social and cultural changes. Colescott's artistic parodies and expressive violations of the taboo against figuration depend as much on the canonical art historical works to which they refer as on the specific issues pertinent to the years in which they are painted. All these are part of the field of contingent meaning the vast network of interconnections to the artist's lived experience and received tradition, current context, and historical legacy.

The shift from autonomy to contingency is brought about in part by the urgent and immediate needs of various activist groups to make their social identity an aspect of their work and vice versa - to use the artwork as a means of leveraging identity into a more central and visible position. This shift becomes evident in almost every aspect of work produced from the late 1970s onward: an Ashley Bickerton construction, with its paradoxically techno-perfect form and techno-phobic theme of ecological disaster and what this implies about the necessity to see all acts of production including artistic ones - in relation to the endangered condition of the material world; a Nayland Blake piece, where clinical associations and suggestive homoerotic subculture form an integral aspect of its threatening (or seductive) presence. No matter what the work, the requirement is the same: the observation of formal properties must be linked to the world which connects artist and viewer. Blake and Bickerton are part of a sensibility in which the social crises of pollution, homophobia, and Aids, of control of corporate profits, gay rights, and right-wing repression stage definite conflicts in the public sphere. The frames of reference implied by their work demonstrate how contemporary artists function in relation to specific communities and identities as well as in the broader public sphere. But if one were to sketch an even larger picture of the changes that took place from the 1970s onward,

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<sup>1</sup> Major figures in this movement included Faith Ringgold and Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago and Faith Wilding, Carolee Schneemann and Alison Knowles.

the significant transformations of the art world conditioned by changes in the social and political sphere would be only one part of the picture. There is another equally profound influence in mainstream art that introduces new images, new materials, and new media: the forceful presence and engagement with mass culture. Again one finds precedents for this interaction throughout the twentieth century. The Futurists and Cubists adored industrial production: Marinetti celebrated the machine-made shoe, while Picasso and Braque pasted cheaply printed wallpaper, journals, and newsprint onto their collages. Surrealist imagery was rapidly and readily appropriated by the advertising industry, which tamed its erotic edges only enough to subvert its shock techniques for its own purposes. Pop Art held a mirror up to the world of comics, commodity culture, and consumer capitalism. But the status of the art object, its secure site within the domains of galleries, museums, and the critical apparatus of reviews, was never seriously challenged. It was always clear where popular culture or mass media ended and where fine arts began. But while those institutions remain intact and functional, preserving the carefully guarded border between the culture of mass media and the culture of fine arts, artists themselves have increasingly eroded the grounds on which such distinctions can be maintained.

If the 1970s was the decade in which power diffused from center to communities in order to return to the center with transformative force, then the 1980s was the decade in which artists took up the language, forms and productions of media culture with a new degree of enthusiasm. At first sight, these agendas might seem diametrically opposed, but the concept of individual and community identity, on which activist movements depended, also had to come to terms with how concepts like "woman", "black" or "chicano" were played out in the images and operations of mass culture. Artists paid attention to the ways in which stereotypes are passed on as part of everyday language and racism and sexism are inscribed in the iconography of daily life - and recycled through media imagery to lived experience. In many cases, this questioning process took visual form in projects that interrogated artists' own identity. Cindy Sherman's photographic self-portraits from the late 1970s and early 1980s are classic instances of such a mirroring query, one in which the artist seeks her "self" as a work produced in the image of a recollected media version. For women artists, this was a key moment, allowing them to break with earlier claims to their essential "femininity" and to turn their attention to the cultural construction of the category of "woman".

The flexibility with which artists move from personal to social construction of self, through the filters of media, language, image, and back again comes through clearly in Jimmie Durham's *Self Portrait* (1986). Durham's life-size cut out figure bears the texts which stereotype Native Americans in mainstream culture, particularly with respect to myths of physical identity or character. Making these myths ruthlessly obvious, Durham confronts their brutality and dehumanizing force. Artists intent on revealing the terms with which an authentic - or stereotyped - ethnic or sexual identity is created also turned their investigation to many aspects of artistic practice that had typically been considered neutral. In his *Untitled* piece of 1992, sculptor David Hammons uses hair whose texture and color clearly indicate African heritage, revealing his connection to a community traditionally excluded from the world of fine art, as have the bottles of cheap "Thunderbird" alcohol, bottlecaps, police barricades, and basketball hoops which show up as elements of his production. In one well-known work, Hammons transformed a face on a cereal box cover into an image of Jesse Jackson, pointing up the insidious insinuation of stereotypes into the most familiar and banal aspects of daily life. The insistence on the interconnection of the fine art and media worlds of individual identity and cultural production, has created a highly permeable boundary between these domains.

But if the works that transform media images or unusual materials into art can be understood in terms of the critical issues they bring into focus, then works that represent more direct appropriations have their own agenda. Jeff Koons' *New Hoover Convertibles* (1981-1987) are indistinguishable from their

mass-produced original - are in fact the very same thing. The work questions the status of images in the art world and the privileged language used to discuss art images and objects as distinct from media images and the products of industry, and to distinguish an "original" from its exact visual replica. The 1980s art world ruthlessly interrogated the way the notions of value, authority, authenticity, and critical insight are bound up in the distinction between a fine art object and a media image. In a world where the sheer quantity of images produced in a media context threatens to bury art world images in an avalanche of advertisements, television, movie, and Internet images, the specific character of art objects becomes increasingly problematic.

But the status of the art image is only one aspect of the art-world fascination with mass media; the reverse aspect is the recognition that the media world is infinitely more powerful in shaping our sense of ourselves, our world, our beliefs, and our understanding than is the art world. Suddenly it is the critical distance, the very disjunctive, nonseamless character of art-world images which becomes their operative distinction. The art world turns a lens on the media world, examining the fantasies of consumption and identity, of glamour and horror, and, ultimately, of power as they are produced in the daily spectacle of our lives. In some cases, this process involves a high-tech apparatus, as in Jenny Holzer's digital displays of running text, while in others the most basic means - Glenn Ligon's use of black oil stick on a pristine gessoed panel - can be equally effective in their confrontation with the coercive messages of dominant culture.

How far, then, does one have to move to get from the last-gasp engagements with formalism, which play themselves in the 1970s, to the current trends in contemporary art? Imagine, for a moment, the contrast one can establish between the delicately gridded *Untitled #11* (1977) canvas of Agnes Martin, with its evident allegiance to lyrical formalism, and the critique of such an aesthetic posed by Ellen Gallagher's *Afro Mountain* (1994), which uses tiny icons of racist imagery to create equally elegant and aesthetically reductive canvases; or between the flat metal plates of Carl Andre's *Twenty-Ninth Copper Cardinal* (1975) floor piece and the speaking presence of Tony Oursler's *Getaway #2* (1994). Mute, gridlike, modular, and elemental, Andre's would seem to be the perfect example of the modern work. And yet this Minimalist piece threatens and questions the viewer's space, encroaching on the sacred boundary between the work of art and the viewer that was so carefully maintained within the modern extension of Western tradition. The anxious viewer, unsure whether to walk on the plates spread out with sublime modesty on the gallery floor, backs into another work and notices his or her own body, its presence in the gallery, and the uncomfortable absence of a clear line of division between perceiving subject and artistic object. But how much more disturbing it is to be addressed by the profoundly abject body of a tiny Tony Oursler work, its anthropomorphic image sustaining an illusion of life as the projected face speaks from its crushed pillow ground: "Leave me alone", "How did I get here?" or "Stop looking at me." Muteness, modesty, sublime autonomy - all are gone. The piece can be viewed without knowledge of the artist's personal neuroses or lack thereof, but the effect remains one of implication and suggestion, of linkages between the permeable space of the viewer's world and the fraught categories of almost-shared experience. The concept of contingency describes the way the work of art relies on this diffused field for its meaning - the Oursler figure is as far from Brancusi's *Bird in Space* as a McDonald's is from the cafés whose culture permeates the motifs in Braque's and Picasso's *Analytic Cubism*.

Invoking the lowest common denominator of mass marketing is significant here. For the fine arts of the 1990s have to compete in a milieu of image saturation densely populated by figments of the commodified world of simulacrum and spectacle described by the critics of the so-called postmodern world (Guy Debord, Jean François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard). Sue Williams' *The Hose*, with its narratives of abuse mediated through bad drawing and hesitant technique, marks the subject's unhappy relation to the balance sheet of power in this exchange. Similarly, Lari Pittman's *Untitled*

#16 (*A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation*, 1993) uses the visual language of mainstream advertisements and product design to articulate his sense of impotence and protest in the face of the increasing commodification of once private sectors of individual life. Nothing is stable in this process: Mike Kelley's animals in *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987) do not provide reassuring tales of childhood, nor do Catherine Opie's portrait photographs present reliable documents of essential categories of gender.

The visual arts are now one tiny zone within the exploded field of visual culture; the line demarcating the fine arts from the mass media and popular arts defies easy or secure identification; the sites on which fine arts depend for their identity - museums and galleries - and the mediating institutions of criticism and publishing dissolve into the world of fashion, corporate sponsorship, publicity, and fundraising. Was it ever really different? Or was there only a momentary dream in which a supposedly modern purity pretended to a clear autonomy and pulled visual arts from the site of church, carnival, world's fair, craft market, and technology exposition into a spotlight of mute focus? In an era in which visual images proliferate at the speed of electronic light, the role and status of art remains distinguished by one salient characteristic: it calls attention to itself as a self-conscious act of framing, of rendering something significant by a moment of separation from that prolific field. Art now functions to call meaning itself into question and requires us to attend to the complex ways in which such meaning is produced - rather than providing a stable, universal, or transcendent truth. Visual presence as pure meaning and aesthetic form is an impotent concept in a world in which hybridity, mutation, and contamination are conspicuous social and aesthetic features. The difficulty is not in reading the meaning of contemporary works of art, but in wishing that meaning to be stable, finite, and guaranteeable. If the early twentieth century was characterized by modern dreams of pure form and utopian change, then the dose of the century is characterized by a fevered energy which drives the visual arts toward a dynamically fertile engagement with all the many contingencies of experience - real and imagined, packaged and produced, lived and recycled.

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