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Terry Barrett  
"Approaches to Postmodern Art-Making"

This article is a straightforward and accessible introduction to major ideas, attitudes, and approaches influencing postmodernist artmaking.<sup>1</sup> The article introduces theory through art examples that can be found in a library and on the Internet. What follows can be used to motivate art-making and for analyzing recent art. The concepts overlap, and many of them are active in single works of art and artifacts of visual culture produced both by individuals and groups. In what follows, postmodernism is sometimes explained by contrasting it to modernism, but these two predominant ways of thinking about art co-exist today and influence one another, and what follows is not an attempt to reduce complex ideas of each to over-simplified either/or understandings.

### **Escaping the Confines of Museums**

An integral part of the art world is the art museum. Robert Smithson made *Spiral Jetty* and other earthworks, in part, to circumvent museums and galleries. He wrote this skeptical view of museums:

"Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called *galleries*. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society."<sup>2</sup>

Other artists, such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, attempt to reach audiences beyond those that visit art galleries and museums by placing their works in public venues. Kruger has placed her pieces internationally, in different languages, on billboards, the outsides of buses, and on tee shirts, matchbooks, and handbags. Jenny Holzer first displayed her now famous *Truisms* on photocopies that she pasted to walls in the SoHo district of New York City. She continues to display work in public spaces.

Christo and Jean-Claude created *The Gates* in Central Park, New York City, in 2005, a project they began in 1979. Nine hundred financially compensated workers participated in the preparation, display, and removal of the project. As Christo and Jeanne-Claude have done for their previous projects, they maintained their creative independence from museums and galleries by financing the \$21-million project by selling preparatory studies, drawings, collages, and scale models. They donated merchandising rights for *The Gates* to a charitable foundation for the park. They accepted no sponsorship or money from the city.

### **Collapsing Boundaries Between "High" and "Low"**

Postmodern artists seek to collapse boundaries that are important to modernists. Modernist artists generally elevate art to a special, independent, and autonomous sphere

of its own, asserting that true art transcends ordinary life. They believe art is "high art" and above the things experienced in "low culture." For example, modernist theorists such as Clement Greenberg disdain "kitsch," a term derived from the German word meaning "trash." Modernists use "kitsch" to label what they consider cheap, tasteless, and tacky things often associated with middle- and lower-class visual preferences: Elvis paintings on velvet, lava lamps, and knick-knacks of all kinds. Beginning with Pop Art in the late 1950s, some artists began to erase the boundary between high and low art by using popular images in their work—comic book images, Campbell's soup cans, Spam, hamburgers and French fries, gas stations, celebrities, and so forth.

Currently, many artists are drawing upon popular culture as a source for their imagery and artistic ideas. Jeff Koons is known for making "kitschy art," a contradiction in terms for modernists. Koons is often associated with his monumental sculpture *Puppy*, made of live flowers, which has been installed worldwide, including Rockefeller Plaza in New York City. Koons's "Banality" series consists of enlarged reproductions of small popular objects such as statues of saints, cartoon animals, Hummel figurines, busty women, naked children, and a souvenir doll of pop singer Michael Jackson.

Takashi Murakami, a contemporary Japanese artist who splits his time between Tokyo and Brooklyn, combines Japanese *anime* images, *manga*, high culture, Japanese Nihon-ga paintings of the 19th century, and influences like Andy Warhol's Factory and Walt Disney animation. His work references religion, subcultures, and art history. An important "low-art" aspect of Murakami's work is its commercial nature: many of his pieces are sold as mass-produced consumer items.

### Rejecting Originality

Modernists value and promote the notion of the artist as genius, which is reflected in the artist's originality of thought and expression. In pre-modern times, artists were anonymous contributors to their communities. In modern times, values shifted and the individual artist became honored as a champion of authentic and free personal expression. Postmodernists question the concept of originality in art, and they are suspect of the possibility of being original. They claim not to hold originality as an aesthetic value.

Rather than attributing the work of art to an individual artist, as modernists do, postmodernists think of artworks as "texts." A work is singular, speaking in one voice, that of the artist, which leads the viewer to look for the artist's (singular) meaning. A text, however, implies that any artwork is not the product of a free and unique individual, but rather a field of citations and correspondences. Postmodernists believe an artwork is a confluence of many voices that speak, blend, and clash, and that culture, more than the individual, influences the image.

