Concepts and Practice of Modernism and Postmodernism

In this essay I will be using information gathered from my own personal research, studio research and relevant topics discussed throughout the lectures. Whilst also, considering social, economic, and cultural factors. I will be discussing and analysing attitudes towards consumerism in Contemporary Art. Built from familiar imagery, such as advertisements, heavily consumed products, such as soup cans, and coke bottles, when we are confronted with artworks that are inspired by consumerism, we will commonly find ourselves with a feeling of uncertainty towards them. The social context of the art is already rooted in the object used, it mocks and comments on the world we live in, where we have been and what we will become. Is consumerist art a light hearted celebration and or parody of consumer life, or is it a political and critical response to the way we live.

Art Critics use terms such as “High Culture” and “Low Culture” when trying to distinguish art forms such as painting and sculpture, from the “lower” popular television shows, magazines, newspapers, pulp fiction and other mass produced commodities. Many modernists such as “Clement Greenberg” (Greenberg 1909-94), argued that low culture was less said after than high culture. High culture was seen as much more “Elitist”(Greenberg 1909-94). For example the first movement of the post-modernist era, being Pop-Art, was made using heavily consumed objects such as tins of soup, comic strips, coke bottles etc. These artist applying their artwork, onto common commodities became a method which incidentally exemplifies the desire for post modernism to undermines the uniqueness and originality of art.

For example Andy Warhol’s “Campbell Soups Cans” (1962) was a prime example of a common object being interlinked with a piece of artwork.

Modernist values and processes in the art world continued to be involved in art practice for many years, until the movement of post-modernism came be to. This movement became most notable during the 1970s and was a one which allowed artists to reject traditional values revolving around art. One of the main rejected values being, the idea that “art” is something special which should be enhanced from common tastes. This coincided with new forms of art such as, performance art, installation art and more common today, computer generated art. As the movement progressed the definition of art became un-definable. Artists who contributed heavily to post-modernist movements such as: pop art and performance, hold both negative and positive attitudes towards consumerism. For example artists such as Frank Stella, wanted to impersonate and parodies the consumer mass culture, by turning his work into objects. Stella’s approach as an abstract expressionist, he states famously that “My paintings is based on the fact that only what can be seen there Is there.” Frank Stella,1970-1987 (p14), which was a response to consumer culture. His work was about making sure there was no reading between the lines or confusion, he did not believe in emotion of sentiment to be of importance in his work. His work became extremally literal in the sense that what he wanted for his work, he did literally onto the canvas. He didn’t want a backstory or foreground, so he chose not to paint backgrounds but to paint motif strips in free hand. This showed that his work was internally disclosed. The way he uses a flat surface, free hand, using geometric designs which are promote to be the works core, add to the to the objects presence of being an object.

Figure 2 Stella,Frank “Odelsk I “ (1971)

Other artists such as Robert Smithson who very purposely, strayed away from following a root that would lead their art to becoming a commodity. Smithson was of the belief that gallery spaces and the traditions of the modern art ways where out dated and post modernism was the way forward. He rejected the idea of art being enticed by humans consumer culture, and desires, he practiced art as an experience rather than something that is looked upon. In his work “Spiral Jetty” (Smithson, 1970). He redefined what one could consider to be art. Challenging the concept of a commodity at this time. His work was made to be experienced not consumed.

Smithson considered the gallery and museum system, and considered it outdated and restricting. In his essay “Cultural confinement” (Smithson,1967) he describes them as “asylums and jails”. He was overall aware that concepts of modernism must be challenge at this time.(Smithson,1967,p 971)

Even though both artists process are practiced in entirely different ways. They both have similarities in the fact that they both had the ability to question the ideals of modernism, and consumerism. From Smithson’s perspective a piece of artwork is exactly that, an artwork and should be enjoyed and experienced, however he did not agree with the core concepts of consumerist art he still was an important role, in allowing other artists the ability to question modernist traditions and whether consumer culture is an appropriate aid or form of art or not. Stella on the other hand parodies the idea of consumer culture entirely by taking advantage of the fact he, himself as a consumer. I would argue both artists do indeed acknowledge one another’s practices, but have found what to be appropriate for their own induvial process and beliefs.

During the 1980s many artists where faced with questions which surrounded the modernists concepts of authorship. Questions such as “Does consumerism influences or change the owner ship of an artwork, like modernism believes.”

Artists who’s practices where widely received as parodies and satire, which involved consumer products and influence. Would have been challenging the notions of modernism whilst also re contextualising and re-engineering the allegory of the subject that they were dealing with, in order to showcase the deeper context in a more appropriate way. This allowed for work to have a commentary element on our culture in a more subtle but critical way.

You could argue that, slightly changing elements of consumer culture cannot be considered as a critique. But I would argue that the distance and perspective the artist gives us as viewers allows us to view consumer culture in different way. By disrupting the point from which we critique, it allows us to reconsider what we are viewing.

For example Cindy Sharman’s “Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980)” In the work she does not portray a particular woman or an actual identity, but an image of what we see to be a woman. In the work she becomes the very thing in which she wants to critique.

In Robert Barthes essay, “The Death Of The Author” (1967), Barthes argues against these claims that artists like Sherman uses in their practices. In his essay he discusses how when reading a piece of texts you don’t think about what the author intended to say, you focus on

what the words actually mean. He believes the process of writing is irrelevant, and that is all about the readers perception.

What I took from reading this essay is that, Barthes “The Death Of The Author” (1967) essay is very clearly a critique on the traditional ways of criticism, which highly count on following, or figuring out the authors intentions behind the piece. This can be compared to way in which modernist art would be critiqued and viewed. I do think Barthes, displays some key claims in his argument to side with non-traditional ways of critique. However, I argue that Sherman’s evaluation of consumer culture, and re contextualisation of common images seen within society are an excellent way to critique and response to the world we live in. I do not think work that is taken literally can hold the same response as work that is a parody of what is happening in society. I think work that is to be made literal would have to celebrate our society instead of critique, in order to allow the audience to absorb or consider what the artist is producing without getting offended.

A group of artists who challenged the very definition of authorship and originality where “The Picture Generation” (1974-1984). They were very intrigued by the ideas of reality and images, inspired by the consumerist culture and movements that came out of it such as pop art. They experimented with a variety of media, such as video, photography, and sculpture to truly challenge and redesign the authorship and uniqueness of image culture. They used the same ways of seduction and enticement that the media placed against them. I bring them up because I would argue that their experimentation which led to the expanded notions of art and criticism, are an important response towards Barthes “Death of The Author”(1967). While he argues that we should ignore all original meaning and intent which the author may or may not have intended . The Pictures Generation lack of belief in the modernist key claims, allows for fresh mode of output and response to art. The images they used where , commonly taken from the mass media and consumer culture allowed them to give light on a new perspective and fresh way of receiving and interpreting an artwork. There re-examined traditional practices such as photography and sculpture and were able to alter them and experiment with new ways of process. Their work was indeed an important part of post modernism, but I would further argue that their ability to explore the lines between originality and re-authorship, allowed more room for high art and popular imagery to meet.

An important essay to note when looking at consumerism and art is “Criticism and complicity”(2004). A recorded discussion between a group of artists, talking about the framework between consumer society and art practice, and how they influence one another. The artists where very aware of the way the world had shifted since the changes brought forth by Post Modernism, they each where able to bring up more specific topics during the talk that they found where important, and some where relevant to consumerism and art. They reference the work of The Pictures Generation in the discussion and do mention there impact and use of images, and the development made form images to objects “How do we view the art?” (2004) had become a topic of discussion in reference to the influence consumerism had on artwork. I bring this point up because I agree with Jeff Koons in this discussion that consumerism has aided the way in which people view art and who views it. Jeff Koons “Two ball 50/50 tank” (Koons, 1985) was a highly recognisable object placed in a way which to be considered “high art”, appealing to both the general public and artists for different reasons. I think consumerism has made art more accessible in this way as it allows for a wider audience view.

An artist for example who used both consumerism and art as a combination to further his

practice being, Keith Haring. During the 1980s he created a pop up shop retail store where he sold an array of commodity’s with his artwork on them. A way where he was able to offer greater access to his work whilst also spreading meaningful and social messages at a low cost.

In conclusion, after reflecting on how consumerism has influenced Contemporary Art, and the attitudes that it faced, from all aspects such as social and cultural. I have considered the different perspectives and the ways in which artists have challenges the notion of authorship and originally regarding consumerism.. I would say that with the constant rise in consumerism, this has made artists regularly question their ideals and whether or not they are appropriate. Artists who combined their work with aspects of our consumer culture into their work, doing so, allowed for a new mode of critique, not just for the artist but for everyone. After pushing the limits of consumerism and challenging these notions has become a great aid, to help spread artist messages and work to wider audiences. Consumerism in Contemporary art was and is an important part of the development in art practice and culture.