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The Death of the Aura?  
is there room for modernist ideologies  
in our postmodern society?

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of  
Art and Design and Complementary  
Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Batchelor of Fine Art

1998



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In researching and compiling this thesis,  
I would like to thank my thesis tutor Paul O'Brien





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## INTRODUCTION

The notion of the 'aura' which was said to surround a piece of artwork, belonged to a set of ideologies, that were essentially modernist. These ideologies concerned themselves with 'absolutes', authenticity and presence. These beliefs were in turn, an essential part of the ordered discourse of the museum.

However, there has been claims that the 'aura' and those same ideologies it embodied, have been dispensed with, that the 'aura' is dead and there is no longer any use for it, in contemporary art.

Walter Benjamin was the first to talk about the destruction of the 'aura' of a work of art, with the development of photography. He claims that the reproduction of a work of art could not have the 'aura' of the original. Douglas Crimp feels that 'postmodernism dispenses with the aura' (Crimp, 1993, p. 58). He also feels that postmodernism rises in the modern myths of mastery and progress but he suggests that whilst post-modernist art dispenses with the aura that Benjamin talks about post-modernist photographic art acquires a new 'aura', which is in fact,

a function not of presence but of absence, severed from an origin, from an originator, from authenticity. In our time the aura has become only a presence, which is to say, a ghost (Crimp, 1993, p.124).





Since Benjamin mentioned the idea of the auratic value of a work of art in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, it has been theorised about. It has been the subject of much debate. In my thesis, I want to examine the whole idea of the 'aura' and discuss various different theories, which explore ideas on the 'death of the aura'. I would also like to examine whether there is room for modernist ideologies in our post-modern society. I especially want to look at the work of Felix Gonzalez Torres, in relation to Benjamin's ideas about the 'aura'. Felix Gonzalez Torres is an artist who has devoted much of his artistic career to "looking for cracks in the master narrative". In many respects he defeats Benjamin and his ideas about the 'aura', with his stack pieces. According to the critics that famous 'aura' is inherent in his work, even though he often works in editions of mass-produced prints.

In my Thesis, I think it is necessary to take an in-depth look at Postmodernism, to see why the notion of the aura may not be of relevance anymore. I think some of the main attributes of postmodernism may help answer the question. Postmodernism has often been written about in terms of, being involved in the breaking down of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' or





‘popular’ art. Many believe that the popular devalues concepts of uniqueness, of authorial genius and formal purity. I would like to examine how true this statement is because I think it may be a direct link to the idea, that the aura has been dispersed with. I also think the debate on *The Death of the Subject* would be of relevance to my discussion. The idea that post modern culture is a hybrid culture with no real ideologies of its own, so it references past ones by using pastiche and appropriation, often in a very cynical way, is a sign that art is being used for different purposes, other than those it was used for in the modernist era, i.e. ‘art for arts sake’.

‘Aura’ is tied to presence and originality. The original or the ideas of it were questioned extensively with the introduction of photography to art. Many feared the changes the photographic would bring in its wake. Paul Delaroche expressed his fears when Daguerre invented the camera by exclaiming ‘from this day painting is dead’.

However, Lyotard sees the situation differently,

that the mechanical and the industrial should appear as substitutes for hand or craft was not in itself a disaster except if one believes that art is in essence the expression of an individuality of genius assisted by an elite craftsmanship (Lyotard, 1983, p.40)



these notions of individuality and genius belong to the modernist ideal. Post-structuralism (which occurs in conjunction with postmodernism) harbours the belief that individualism is a myth. They believe that we are historically not biologically defined and that everything we produce contains in it references to the past. Within postmodernism, such ideas of the original, or the individual which are connected to the auratic in art, are put forward for questioning and the question arises, as to whether they are still possible or desirable.



## CHAPTER 1

### BENJAMINS' 'AURA'

#### A Modernist Ideal

#### 1.1 Modernism and the 'Aura'

Before proceeding any further, I think it is necessary to establish what this notion of the aura as Benjamin talks about it, actually is. Aura, the word, is described in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as

the distinctive atmosphere diffused by, or attending a person, place, etc. or (in a mystic or spiritualistic use) a supposed subtle emanation visible as a sphere of white or coloured light surrounding the body of a living creature (Oxford Dictionary, 1990, p. 71).

If one substitutes the word painting for 'person', the idea of what the aura is, as it is talked about in the visual arts, should become clearer. The 'aura' however, is fundamentally a concept that is frequently used with regard to works of art in the modernist period. The idea originated in the early modern period and it was the aura of the work of art, that Marcel Duchamp succeeded in destroying in 1919 with his altered reproduction of the Mona Lisa, *L.H.O. O.Q* (page 6) and also with his exhibiting of a mass produced urinal, as a fountain sculpture signed





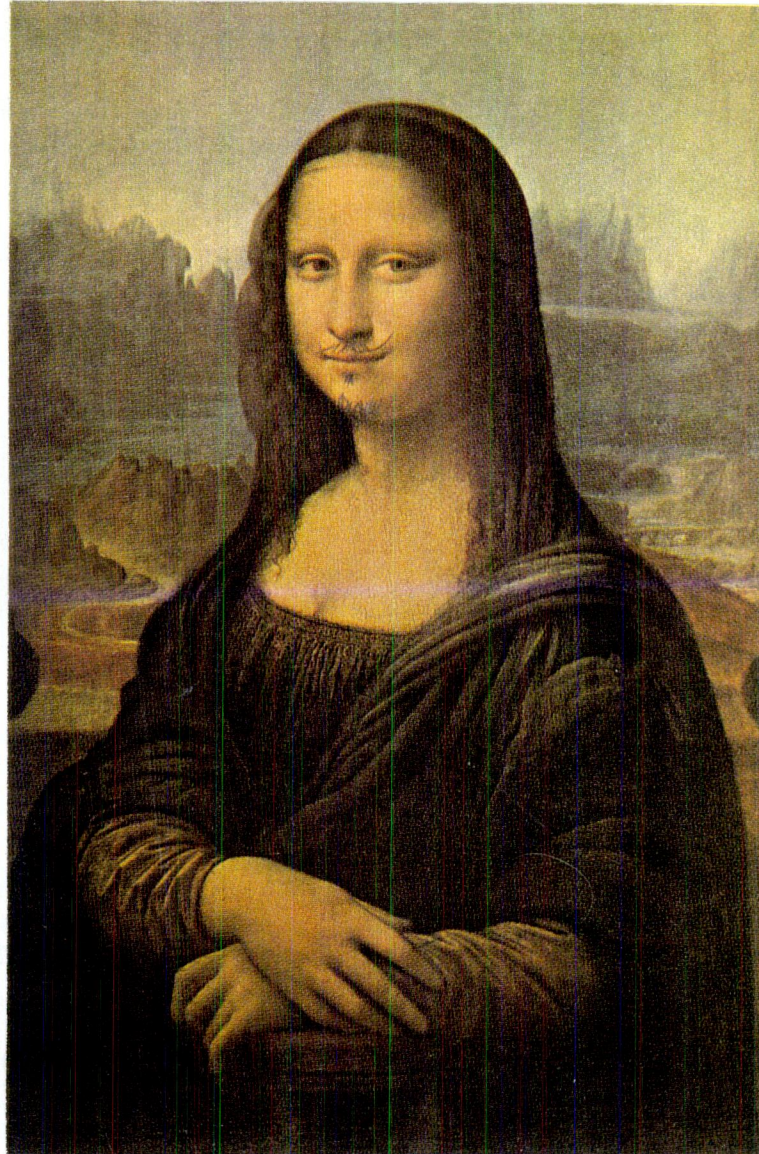


Fig. 1.1 Marcel Duchamp – L'HOOQ 1919





‘R Mutt’ (page 8). However, it was only when Walter Benjamin says, “that which withers in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction is the aura of a work of art” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 223) that it was introduced into the language of art criticism and has been endlessly theorised about since. Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura’ is an aura of uniqueness and presence. This particular aura has to do with the presence of the original, with authenticity and with the unique existence of the work of art in the place where it happens to be. The presence of the artist must be detectable in the work of art, for it to be recognised as ‘authentic’, Jean Francois Lyotard sees this ‘aura’ as being closely linked to ‘essence’ and the modernist preoccupation of presenting the unrepresentable. He sees modern painting as being obsessed with the fact that the unrepresentable exists. According to Lyotard, modern painters devoted much of their time, trying to make visible in their paintings, something which can neither be seen nor made visible. This aspect of the aura, which would be linked to modernist ideas about authorial genius and the artist as prophet, who presents a less ‘enlightened’ public with works of art they cannot comprehend, possibly originated with the forefathers of





Fig. 1.2 Marcel Duchamp Fountain 1915





abstraction, in the early modern period. Mondrian embarked on a quest for the 'essence' and thus gave birth to abstraction. The idea that one could arrive at the essence of a painting and receive spiritual gratification or enlightenment from it, continued right through the different stages of modernism and even enjoyed a revival in the 1980's, when artists disillusioned with the postmodern agenda sought to produce art with the auratic qualities, Benjamin had spoken about decades before. Many believed at this time that art should resist popular culture and express universal truths. This led to a resurgence in painting that was in many ways, a rehash of abstract expressionist techniques. Along with this new revival of painting came, the group exhibitions that promoted it. Art critic Barbara Rose pioneered an exhibition entitled *American Painting, the Eighties* and *A New Spirit in Painting* took place at the Royal Academy, in London, in 1981 and included such artists as Lucien Freud, David Hockney, Sandro Chia and Julian Schnabel. All these artists were involved in the battle for the survival of painting.



## 1.2 The Origins of the Aura

Abstraction, which was the first stage of modernism to concern itself with 'presenting the unrepresentable' came into being in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was born out of a desire to express the 'inner nature' and 'absolute truths' in painting. Mondrian was one of its founding members and he was concerned with portraying a spiritual essence in his work. Theosophy was very much in vogue at the time. This was a practice which was about transcending the physical to challenge us spiritually, by evoking the 'inner soul'. This would have influenced many artists who wished to take a new direction after Darwin's theory of evolution was disclosed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. People began to search further afield for explanations of life, that were not rooted in pure fact and science. To be modern meant to break with tradition and this is exactly what these artists did.

Geometry, colour and form became the basic components that were used in the execution of an abstract work of art. Figuration was abandoned and the use of representational images was replaced by abstract forms, because it was believed that the use of the materialistic object distracted the





viewer and interfered with the arrival at the 'essence'. This new art of the time was believed to be universal because it was thought to appeal to everyone regardless of colour, sex, race or class. Everybody, or so it was thought, had the ability to receive spiritual gratification from an abstract work of art.

The notion of the aura is closely linked to Mondrian's idea of the 'essence'. Both could be described as being in the business of 'presenting the unpresentable', of seeing beyond the picture plane to arrive at a higher state, whereby you will feel a presence in the work of art that will 'move' or 'enlighten' you.

This concept is essentially modernist, but the aura is also closely linked to several other concepts which are also embodiments of modernism. These include the modernist ideals of authenticity, originality, presence and purity of expression. I feel that it is necessary to take a closer look at modernism and its ideals to see how the concept of the aura is inextricably linked to it.



### 1.3 Greenbergian Modernism

Modernism occurs in a stage of advanced capitalism and sweeps right across the board to embrace all forms of life and culture. There are several different stages of it. It breaks with tradition in that it subverts traditional modes of representation. Greenberg is one of its most celebrated critics and it was he who suggested that Manet was the first real modernist painter, by the way his paintings declared the surfaces on which they were painted. He claims that

modernism uses art to call attention to art – the limitations that constitute the medium of painting, the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment were treated by the old masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are acknowledged openly (Greenberg, 1982, p. 6).

With modernism, the form of a work of art becomes as important as or more important than its content. This subversion of traditional modes of representation not only occurs in the arts but in the sciences and also in the structure of society. Modernism occurs in conjunction with new technological advances in mass production and in photography and film. It occurs at a time when the future wasn't just a question of survival anymore. These new



technological inventions and scientific advances enabled mankind to have a certain amount of freedom to direct its attention toward experimentation and to challenge its energies to create a better future for everyone. It was believed that the arts and sciences would promote an understanding of the world and the self, moral progress and the happiness of human beings. Modernists everywhere set out to “tame the irrational with rational techniques” (Levin, 1979, p. 2). Modernism predicted a glorious future and saw itself as the “infinite advance towards social and moral betterment” (Habermas, 1983, p. 4).

It was a movement that longed for perfection, purity, clarity and order. A movement, or a state of mind that put absolute faith in scientific objectivity, scientific invention, logic of structure, logic of gesture or material and it was based on a faith in a technological future. It believed in progress, in objective truth, and was a movement that had an enthusiasm for experimentation. It concerned itself with master narratives, literal thinking and purity of thought and purity of expression. It included in its discourse ideas about authenticity, presence, uniqueness and originality. In many





respects the artist was the self-proclaimed master who embarked on a quest to educate, liberate or enlighten the masses. It was believed by many that art was the expression of individuality and genius, assisted by elite draughtsmanship. Within modernism authenticity was empowered and was closely linked to the idea of the aura. Walter Benjamin proclaimed the aura of a work of art dead with the development of the age of mechanical reproduction. He sees the aura as being closely linked to presence, according to Benjamin there can be no replica of it. "The presence of the original is a prerequisite to the concept of the original" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 222).





#### 1.4 Benjamins' Aura

Benjamin's aura had to do with the presence of the original, with authenticity and the unique existence of the work of art in the place it happened to be. The presence of the artists should be detectable, for the work of art to be considered authentic. Benjamin says that the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking one element, that is its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. It was Benjamin who introduced the idea of the aura into the language of art criticism and first expressed fears that the age of the mechanical reproduction would radically change the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was Duchamp who succeeded in destroying the yet unnamed aura of a work of art, years before Benjamin. Duchamp and the avant-garde were concerned with bringing art back to reality and transforming the way art was produced, distributed and consumed. By altering a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, Duchamp flies in the face of the auratic nature of art. He destroys the aura of authenticity and uniqueness that constituted the works distance from life and that required contemplation and immersion on the part of the spectator. Benjamin realises in another of his essays, that



the decay of the aura of a work of art was not the sole responsibility of the age of mechanical reproduction, but that the practices of Dada also helped the process along. After all it was Duchamp who was called “the ghost, that haunts postmodernism”(Merquoir, 1986, p. 17).



## CHAPTER 2

### POSTMODERNISM

#### 2.1 Characteristics of Postmodernism

In this chapter, I wish to look at postmodernism and the issues it concerns itself with, in order to understand why it is thought that postmodernism dispenses with the aura.

Crimp suggests in his essay *On the Museums Ruins* that within the agenda of postmodernism “notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum are undermined” (Crimp, 1993, p. 53). The aura is a product of these ideals Crimp talks about, so if ideologies of originality, authenticity, and presence are undermined within postmodern discourse, then so too is the ‘aura’.

Postmodernism occurs in a stage of late capitalism in a post-industrial society. The date of its birth has been the subject of many a debate since the sixties and there is still a certain ambiguity as to when it actually began. Some argue that it is just a different strain of modernism that evolved out of the last recognisable strain - high modernism. The confusion





that exists when trying to categorise the post modern is only heightened by the very fact that the word modernism occurs in the word postmodernism

Modernism as that from which postmodernism is breaking away remains inscribed into the very word with which we describe our distance from modernism (Huyssen, 1986, p. 183)

Because of this, it is evident that the postmodern is not as independent from the modern as it claims to be. It is always concerned with the modern, as after all, it is the postmodern. Within postmodernism, several different strains exist. One facet of postmodernism claims to aspire towards destabilising the modernist critique of

traditional idealist and romantic notions of authorship and authenticity, originality and intentionally, self centred subjectivity and personal identity (Huyssen, 1986, p. 213).



## 2.2 Robert Rauschenberg - The First Postmodernist

It involves itself in the breaking down of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' or 'popular' art. In his essay *On the Museums Ruins*, Crimp talks of Rauschenberg as being the first postmodernist artist because he moved away from what was thought in many respects to be 'pure' painting and incorporated photography and reproductive techniques such as silk screen into his paintings.

One of the first applications of the term postmodernism to the visual arts occurs in Leo Steinberg's 'Other Criteria' in the course of a discussion of Robert Rauschenberg's transformation of the picture surface into what Steinberg calls a 'flatbed' referring significantly to a printing press (Crimp, 1993, p. 47).

He makes the claim that Rauschenberg creates a new picture surface altogether by the nature of his subject matter and the techniques he uses to realise them. Rauschenberg's 'flatbed' is a surface which receives an array of cultural imagery that is not compatible with the pictorial field of either postmodernist or modernist painting. In his 'flatbeds' Rauschenberg makes the shift in subject matter from nature to culture "a postmodern picture abandons the natural orientation of a modernist painting" (Crimp, 1993, p. 47).





Rauschenberg, who was born in 1925, in Port Arthur, Texas, received a formal art education, under Joseph Albers, at Black Mountain College. He claims that he never understood the tortured disposition of the abstract expressionists and sought instead for his art to be an affirmation of life. Like Andy Warhol, he sought to change the perception of artist as prophet, but in a different way. He merely wanted to celebrate life in his paintings and not to suggest improvements in creation through his art. He had a different agenda to that of the abstract Expressionists and was often ridiculed for it. His work marks a return to subject and he felt that the observer had to be a collaborator, to help complete the work. In his work, there exists a multiplicity of possible associations. It is up to the viewer to interpret the work whichever way he chooses to.

Beginning with his *White Paintings* in 1951, Rauschenberg tried to redirect the viewers attention on the outside world, he wanted his paintings to be like a window, where one would look in, in order to look out. There is a lack of surface detail in these white canvasses and this provides a neutral backdrop for shadows and reflections of colours in



the environment. Gradually found objects were introduced into the paintings, to replace the neutral surfaces, as reflections of the experimental world. His first “combine” paintings were started around this time and involved the application of printed matter to the picture surface.

Eventually, by 1953, all types of materials were being used in these “combines”, which were called so because they were often free-standing assemblages or constructions with materials, which combined elements of both painting and sculpture.

Rauschenberg wished to incorporate the inherent character of found materials in his paintings, with personal momentums, such as photographs of himself or his loved ones. He wished to exploit the vividness of associations attached to real things in his painting. “Raschenbergs art recast the existentialist discovery of the self as a discovery of the environment from which it takes its form” (Fineberg, 1995, p. 176). Rauschenberg was soon using all kinds of materials, in his paintings. In *Bed* (page 22), he uses an old quilt and pillow, part of a sheet, paint, toothpaste and







Fig. 2.1 Robert Rauschenberg Bed 1955





nailpolish. In *Canyon* (1959) a stuffed American eagle seems to take flight from the canvas.

*Factum I* and *Factum II* were a comment on the abstract Expressionists claims, about spontaneous creativity. He made two paintings exactly the same, brushstroke for brushstroke. Nobody can tell which one came first, or which one was the product of that spontaneous creativity like Duchamps readymades, these paintings attempt to undermine the idea of the authenticity of the autographic gesture.

Rauschenberg soon began to execute paintings that were totally flat - these were the silkscreen paintings. Most of the imagery, that the artist uses was gleaned from the media, because he felt that he should represent what was going on around him, in his work. He felt that these screens gave him the freedom to manipulate images on each other. Much of the imagery was political, John F. Kennedy's image was used frequently. However, Rauschenberg balanced this charged political imagery with details of ordinary things and the impersonal techniques of mechanical reproduction.



Although, Raschenberg was not a pop artist – he paved the way in making pop culturally acceptable.

Andreas Huyssen feels that the use of silkscreen destroys the aura of a work of art, which according to Benjamin is the prerequisite for its authenticity. He says that “to an ever greater degree the work of art produced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (Huyssen, 1986, p. 155), which changes the whole concept of why art is produced and consumed. This contributes to the destruction of the auratic art object as Benjamin saw it.





### 2.3 Embracing the 'Other' - Pop Art and Andy Warhol

Postmodernism differs from modernism in that it blurs the lines that distinguish 'high art' from popular culture. It compares to the avant garde in that it attacks the art of the institution and the way art is produced, marketed and consumed. It questions the modernist aesthetic and its conception of the artist as genius, the artist as the individual who in his own unique style makes known his own unique vision of the world. Post-structuralism which occurs in conjunction with postmodernism claims individualism is a myth.

Greenbergian modernism opposed the infiltration of Kitsch into art. It was decided that modernism feared contamination from mass culture and hid this anxiety in the guise of an irreconcilable opposition to Kitsch

As modernism hides its envy for the broad appeal of mass culture behind a screen of condescension and contempt. Mass culture, saddled as it is with pangs of guilt yearns for the dignity of serious culture which forever eludes it (Huyssen, 1986, p. 17).



Postmodernism embraces this 'other (mass culture). It has on its agenda, the intention of rectifying modernism's exclusion of mass culture from its discourse. Postmodernism intended to bring art back to reality with the arrival of Warhol and pop art in the 1960's. It "seemed to ridicule the deadly serious art criticism which never acknowledged fantasy, play and spontaneity". (Huyssen, 1986, p. 142) Pop showed an obvious enjoyment of 'play' and a focus on our daily environment which succeeded in bringing art back to reality. It was believed that the reproductive techniques of silk-screen destroyed that century old 'aura', Benjamin spoke about and also that the popular devalued concepts of uniqueness of authorial genius and formal purity. These are all aspects of the belief that postmodernism dispenses with the aura.

Andy Warhols' *Campbell's Soup-Cans* (page 27) are reproduced several times using the reproductive technique of silk screen. The image is a banal everyday image of a soup can. It is an image that was thought at the time, to be more suited to advertising than to 'high' art. It does not fit into the modernist agenda of the 'aura' for several reasons. For one, it uses the reproductive techniques of silkscreen which destroy the idea of the original because it can be reproduced many times and secondly, its imagery borders on the







Fig. 2.2 Andy Warhol, One Hundred Cans 1962





‘popular’ which in a modernist sense, also devalues concepts of uniqueness. It was thought that “the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the viewer” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 241). Greenberg saw ‘popular’ art as the art of instant assimilation that was produced for mass consumption. However, whilst the aura as Benjamin knew it was thought to be destroyed, Huyssen argues that “the aura absent from Warhol’s works is thus reintroduced in a kind of star cult in the auratization of the artist Andy Warhol” (Huyssen, 1986, p. 155).

Warhol was born outside Pittsburgh in 1928 and was a successful graphic artist, before he embarked on a career in painting and became the ‘king of pop’. Warhol’s charismatic personality enabled him to acquire a level of fame, that, at the time, was only associated with pop stars and movie stars. The aura, which he actively sought to rid his work of, was reintroduced with the emergence of the cult status of Andy Warhol, the artist.

Throughout his career, Warhol made various attempts to empty his paintings of the subjective self. He encouraged others to suggest his subjects and employed assistants to produce his work, for him. He dismissed originality and was interested in eliminating the





artists touch altogether from the work. He did this by using silkscreen techniques, at first, by hand and then by using photographic images. He sought to produce paintings that contained a mechanically detached image with no trace of expressive gesture or individuality. He removed the artist from art through the use of commercial techniques and he believed that art could not escape being treated as a commodity. Warhol held the conception of the artist as businessman, rather than prophet. He celebrated the sameness of mass culture in his work

Whats great about this country is that America started the tradition, which the richest consumer can buy essentially the same things as the poorest – you know, that the President drinks coke, Liz Taylor drinks coke, and just think, you can drink coke too (Warhol, 1975, p. 100-1).

He was devoted to television, society columns and fans magazines and he often used images he found in magazines for his paintings. In doing so he flies in the face of abstract expressionism and everything it stood for. In his silk-screens of *Marilyn Monroe*, (page 30) it is a slick image of a slick image. He manages to catch her visual appearance, however, because of the use of mechanical technique of silk screen, the images appear so artificial and so repeatable that all claims to uniqueness seem ironically undercut. Warhols use of mundane, unglamorous, ordinary consumer







Fig. 2.3      Andy Warhol      Marilyn Diptych 1962





products and objects, especially in his earlier work, enhance the belief that the auratic nature of the art is lost because, it was thought that the popular devalued concepts of uniqueness and authorial genius.

The auratic nature of the work which is lost because of Warhol's treatment of the work and also his conception of art as a business, whereby he employed people to do his work for him, reappears in the enigma that is Andy Warhol. He ardently and openly courts fame through his art and firmly believed that himself and his friends were, 'the art exhibit, we were the art incarnate and the sixties were really about people not about what they did' (Warhol, 1980, p. 133).

Many believed that he wasn't so much of a genius, only for the fact that he became famous and remained so. When he turned up at the ICA in Philadelphia in 1965, for his retrospective, himself and his friend Edie Sedgwick were greeted by so many screaming fans, looking for autographs, the gallery director took the paintings off the wall, for fear that they might be damaged, whilst they signed autographs. This example makes it quite clear to me, that it wasn't so much the art, that these people had come to see, they



had come instead, to see the artist. Thus Warhol, had acquired the aura he desperately sought to destroy in his paintings.





## 2.4 Fredric Jameson - 'The Death of the Subject'

Fredric Jameson, writes about the *Death of the Subject*, in his essay *Postmodernism in a Consumer Society*. This is a debate about the postmodern trend of using pastiche and appropriation, this also questions the idea of the original and the auratic qualities in a work of art. Pastiche is described by Jameson as:

the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language, but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry without parody's, ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without the still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, that has lost its sense of humour (Jameson, 1982, p. 114).

The photographs of Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman all use pastiche. They address photography's claim to originality, showing these claims to be the fiction that they are. They show photography to be always a representation, always already seen. These artists confiscate, appropriate and steal images, so that in their work the original cannot be located.

Postmodernism is thought to exist in a hybrid culture, a culture that aspires to be global, a culture that embraces eclecticism which is described by Huyssen as being



the degree zero of contemporary general culture, One eats McDonalds food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong. Knowledge is a matter for T.V. games (Lyotard, 1983, p. 42).

Cities have become melting pots of different cultures and the globe has shrunk with the onslaught of new technological inventions (Internet), culture has become homogenous and this is the reason for *The Death of the Subject*.

Because of that self-same homogenous culture, it is believed that we have nothing left to reference anymore, so more often than not we use pastiche and appropriation, to reference the past. As Mequoir<sup>R</sup> says, we are the spiders spinning threads of art out of our own bellies, making art about art. If one references another original in a piece of artwork, it is bound to disrupt the auratic nature of that same piece.

Within postmodernism, it is believed that we have learned from modernism, as modernism existed in a patriarchal society that took place in the withdrawal of the real - a movement that concentrated on genius, progress and purity which left in, its wake, two world wars, Hitler's concept of the Aryan race and the holocaust.





Postmodernism as a result, welcomes plurality, it embraces the 'other', it harbours the promise of a 'post-white', 'post-male', 'post -puritan', 'post-humanist', world. However, the *Death of the Subject* is said to be a failure to focus on our present aesthetically.

This is sometimes seen as an end to individuality. Jameson believes that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself because artists of the present day are no longer clear about what they are supposed to be doing.



## CHAPTER 3

### CRACKS IN THE MASTER NARRATIVE

#### The Work of Felix Gonzalez Torres

#### 3.1 A Postmodern Agenda

In this chapter, I want to look at the work of Felix Gonzalez Torres in relation to Benjamin's ideas about the aura.

Felix Gonzalez Torres was a Cuban American artist, who died in 1996, from the aids virus. He spent most of his artistic life in New York and he said himself that he was an artist who wished to 'redefine the role of the artist'. He was an artist who worked, in many ways under the guise of modernism, whilst devoting his time to looking for 'Cracks in the Master Narrative', so as to bring his points across subtly. He wished to investigate "new notions of placement, production and originality" (Gonzalez-Torres, 1993, p. 93) in his work. He liked to make art that was interactive, that you could touch and take home, if you wished. Gonzalez Torres sought to rectify those old notions of art, that Andreas Huyssen talks about in *After the Great Divide*, with regard to *Documenta 7* in Kassel, Germany.



"Here it was again, that old notion of art, no touching, no trespassing, the museum as temple, the artist as prophet, the work as relic and cult object, the halo restored" (Huysen, 1986, p. 179).





### **The 'Stack' Pieces - Sabotaging the Museum**

Gonzalez Torres works in various media, using different techniques, in the execution of his work. However, these same techniques recur frequently in his exhibits. The work generally has a social or political focus and ranges from dealing with the death of his partner Ross, from aids and campaigning for gay rights, to trying to change peoples' perceptions about art and the way it is produced, marketed and distributed. His 'stack' pieces are perhaps the most famous he has produced. These pieces are designed to sit on the floor and are formed from enormous quantities of individual sheets of paper which are perceived at first as a solid block, not unlike the early minimalist sculptures of Donald Judd and Robert Morris. They are very clean, very precise and possess an image of authority. However on closer inspection, they are seen to be a large accumulation of paper, seemingly solid in the precision with which they have been stacked. Sometimes they are contaminated by something social, like a photograph of the ocean or birds soaring in the sky. At other times they are blank or may have a border around the page. These preconceived solid blocks suddenly become very fragile when the viewer



realises in disbelief that he is allowed to take one home, to do with whatever he pleases.

These works only succeeded in the museum context and they are as much to do with 'sabotaging the authority of the institution', as being a "standard metaphor for the unfixable and evanescent stretch of life where events rise and disappear, collect and dissipate" (Tallman, 1994, p. 64).

The museum is under strict instructions to reprint the sheet as often as it is necessary, for the work to retain the dimensions specified by the artist, so no matter how covetous the crowd, the piece will not disappear, but neither will it remain the same from day to day, it is in a constant state of flux. For Gonzalez Torres, the notion of the fragment is important in the comprehension of this process, not fragment as a part of something, but as a constitute element that potentially has particular characteristics and is capable of acquiring its own meanings. The new meanings, that the pieces acquire, have nothing to do with the artist or the museum.





The first stack piece was done in 1988 as a memorial piece. It was designed so it was roughly the shape and size of a tombstone and its pages were printed with advertisements for an American Memorial Day Sale. Other stacks share the mortality theme, *Untitled (The End)* 1990 consisted of black bordered, text-free, sheets of paper.

In *Untitled (Death by Gun)* (page 41), the pages were printed with faces, names and brief histories of gunshot victims. In *Untitled 1989-90* two piles of paper, adjacent to each other, reproduced two different phrases, 'somewhere better than this place', 'nowhere better than this place'. The spectator may chose one or the other and endow it with personal meanings. At the same time, in reflecting on both options, the spectator recreates a third possibility, an imaginary space, neither here nor there, where 'better' has no precise meaning, but is contingent relative. With his *Untitled (Implosion)* 1991 Gonzalez Torres made an edition of silk-screens, limited to 190 impressions and 10 artists proofs, signed and numbered. However, *Untitled (Implosion)* 1991 was only available as a unit, the whole edition, all 190 examples plus all ten artists proofs



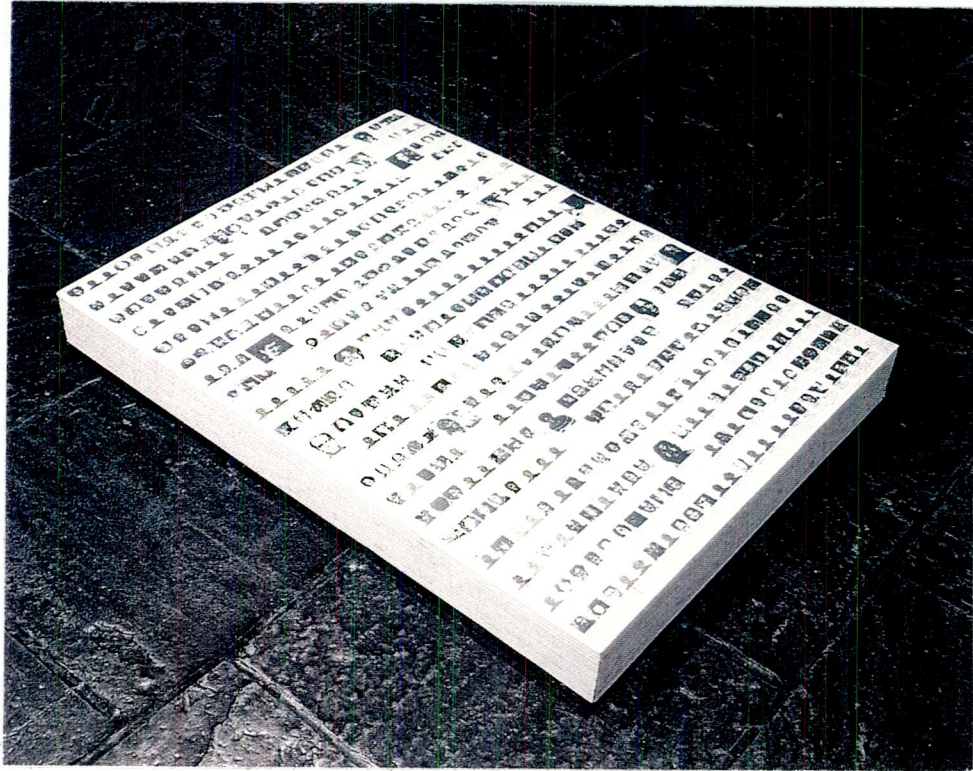
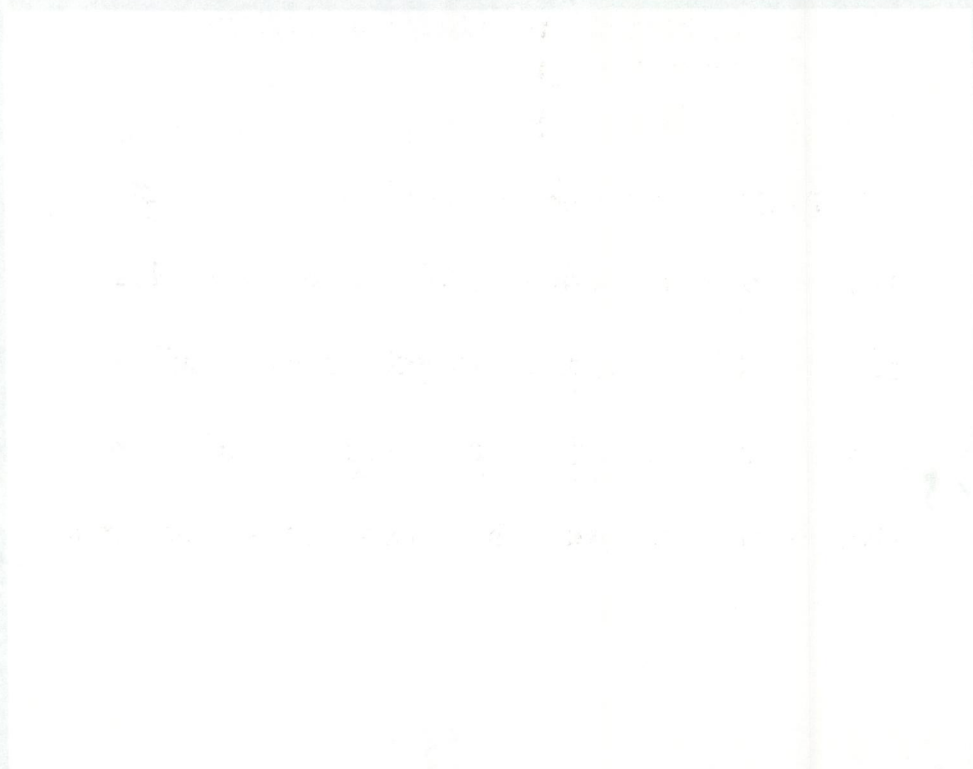


Fig. 3.1 Felix Gonzalez Torres - Untitled (Death by Gun) 1990





With one clever stroke Gonzalez Torres has cut to the quick the artificial oxymoronic, nature of the 'limited edition', that unsatisfactory compromise between endless repetition and the aura of originality (Tallman, 1991, p.14).

The image of *Untitled (Implosion)* 1991 is an even coating of dull opalescent silver, a colour that is less a colour as such that it is a mute reflection of whatever conditions surround it. Gonzalez Torres had in mind the look of a switched off T.V. tube, a dying light, morose and vacuous.





### 3.3 Questioning Originality - Benjamin in Defeat

With all these stack pieces, Gonzalez Torres questions the idea of originality in art, especially with regard to reproduction. It has been said that he has had his revenge on Benjamin, with his paper 'stacks' because he makes an original artwork out of thousands of reproduced images. These works go on to be individual, original works of art, depending on the person who takes them, but the 'stack' or the sum total of all the pieces put together is also an original.

Benjamin claimed that a reproduction of a work of art could not have the aura of the original, one-of-a-kind piece, but you made a work of art that is an original reproduction (Rollins, 1993, p.24).

In Gonzalez Torres' eyes they will always be remembered in the minds of the people who took them as being part of the original block. He feels that the reproductions or the facsimiles of the original will always point toward the source of emission or the 'real' thing, which in turn make them desirable. He also feels that they are indestructible because they can be endlessly duplicated. These pieces are usually fabricated for exhibition purposes and sometimes they are fabricated in different places at the same time. For



Gonzalez Torres there is no original, just one certificate of authenticity. Whilst an individual piece of paper from one of the stacks does not constitute the piece itself, it is a piece. At the same time the sum of many pieces of the identical paper is the 'piece', but not really because there is no one piece, only an ideal height of endless copies. These 'stacks' of Felix Gonzalez Torres conceive art as process, rather than object, with them Gonzalez Torres "confronts the challenge of mass production and transgresses the idea of the work of art as an organic whole" (Amor, 1995, p.68).

He feels that the interaction of parts within the whole is the essence of composition and he seeks to reassess notions of the age-old belief that good composition is identified by unity, its integrity and as a natural result of the latter, its lasting 'power'.

The execution of a piece of work that is an edition, rather than a unique painting or sculpture with the help of mass production is just one of the 'cracks', Gonzalez Torres has concentrated on. Very often, the edition which is that group of art objects that exist in numerous examples, each with an





equal claim to authenticity, is of a fundamentally more different nature than its more prestigious cousin – the unique painting or sculpture. Things that exist in multiple are seen as less authentic, less authoritative and are seen as less likely to possess that famous ‘aura’ Benjamin talks about. Multiplicity is often thought to fly in the face of uniqueness and authority.



### 3.4. Exploring New Options

However, Gonzalez Torres seeks to change our perceptions about art, there is a certain auratic quality to his 'stacks'.

Benjamin's argument after all, was only one man's vision, that was promoted by modernism. Lyotard makes the claim that because mechanical reproduction acts as a substitute for the hand, it is not necessarily a bad thing, unless you believe in the modernist ideals of individuality, genius and elite craftsmanship. It is exactly these sentiments of 'genius' and elite craftsmanship that Gonzalez Torres wishes to change, 'the difference between the edition and the unique object might be some poignant metaphors for broader social and cultural truths'(Tallman, 1991, p. 13).

Along with his stack pieces, Gonzalez Torres also does pieces, which he calls his 'candy spills'. In these 'Candy Spills' viewers are invited to eat the sweets. They often bear titles like *Untitled (Lover Boys)* this license makes clear allusions to desire and consumption especially illicit desire and consumption. In a space such as the museum where we have been told 'do not touch' we are now sanctioned to actually eat the piece. The artist has been



making these pieces since 1990 and they appeal to the senses, to taste, touch and vision. Like the paper 'stacks' these pieces will not disappear because the artist has insisted that the 'spill' be in a constant state of replenishment.

*Untitled (Placebo)* (page 48) consisted of 1500lbs of sweets wrapped in silver paper and was shown in abundant light in a room in the Hirshhorn Gallery. On entering the room, the brilliant silver surface catches one's immediate attention, it is only when one gets up close to the floor piece, that one identifies the tiny packages as sweets. It is even more pleasurable when one realises that one is allowed to take and taste. This series of works, articulates in a certain way the concept of 'jouissance', that Barthes developed in his book *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Joseph Kosuth is another artist who tries to rupture people's presumptions about art - its auratic qualities, its dependency on the market, its place in the museums. He went about this task similarly to Gonzalez Torres, in many ways, by doing anonymous works in magazines, newspapers, billboards (Gonzalez-Torres also did billboards), bus advertisements





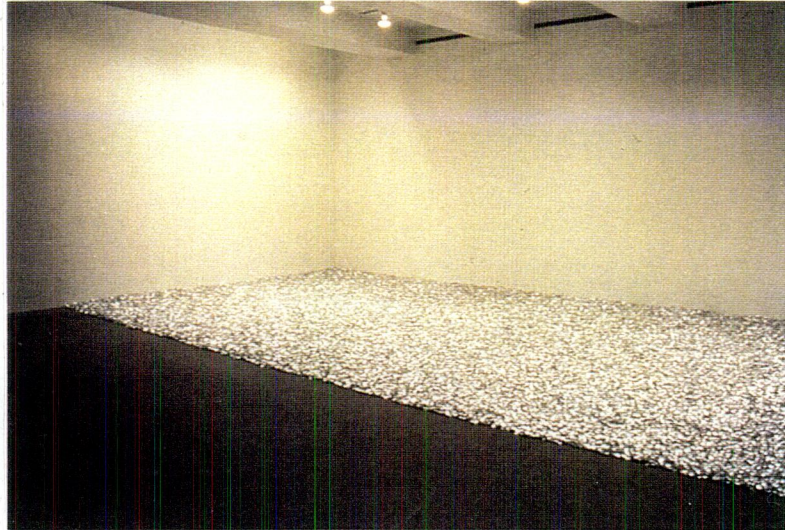


Fig. 3.2 Felix Gonzalez Torres Untitled (Placebo)1991

1. The first part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics.

2. The second part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics.

3. The third part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics.

4. The fourth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics.

5. The fifth part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the general principles of the theory of the structure of the atom. It is shown that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and that the structure of the atom is determined by the laws of quantum mechanics.



etc. With a work such as *One and Five Clocks*. One of which is in the Tate in London, he had people making sure that the clock was running and showing the right time. He says he wanted his clocks understood, as common objects, as props for a proposition about art and not as having any special auratic quality.

Like Kosuth, Gonzalez Torres investigated the notion of public and private spaces with his billboards. The condition of purchasing such a piece of work is that, it can only be shown in public. Kosuth in an attempt to sabotage the art market, refused to sell anything from 1968 to 1979. He also did anonymous public media pieces. He asked for a grant, such as a scientist might do and for this, he gave the person the right to put his piece in public.

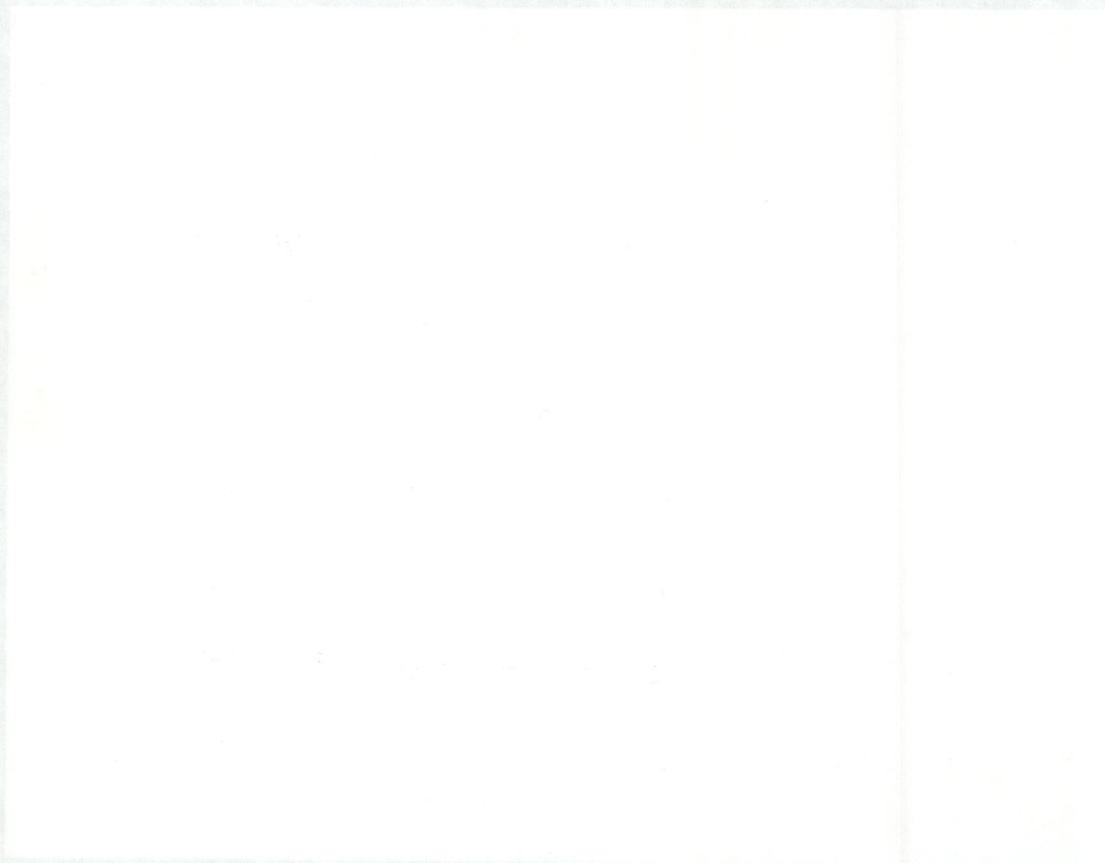
Gonzalez Torres billboard *Bed* (page 50) was shown in Glasgow in 1992. It explores ideas of public and private. The image is a photographic image of a beautiful, clean double bed, which was erected on hoardings in a grimy industrial city. Two people have recently occupied it and their imprints are still visible. There exists a tension







Fig. 3.3 Felix Gonzalez Torres Untitled (Bed) 1992





between the idea of intimacy associated with bed and the publicness of the space it is shown in.

Gonzalez Torres also does 'date caption' pieces which exist in public, on billboards and also in private around the walls of peoples living rooms. They are presented in arbitrary order and refuse narrative resolution, disrupting linear syntax and undermining language itself. They consist of disconnected memories disparate places and diverse social phenomena, which are evoked with the rapidity of shifting T.V. Channels. These works consist of an ensemble of the artist's public and private life.



## CONCLUSION

Within the framework of postmodern art, many artists seek to change people's perceptions about art, by making art that has the intention of sabotaging what they believe are the elitist ideals of modernism. Postmodernism is not unlike the avant-garde in that it seeks to bring art back to reality. In many ways, it is concerned with destroying that old notion of art, that Andreas Huyssen talks about in *After the Great Divide*, "no touching, no trespassing, the museum as temple, the artist as prophet, the work as relic and cult object, the halo restored" (Huyssen, 1986, p.179).

Many artists have engaged in the destruction of the auratic qualities of art, starting with Duchamp in 1919. Since then there have been many who have concerned themselves with its sabotage, or at the very least, its metamorphoses. Crimp feels whilst Benjamins' 'Aura' is dead, it has been replaced by another, only now it is, "a function not of presence, but of absence" (Crimp, 1993, p.124).





Walter Benjamin predicted the death of the aura of a work of art, with the age of mechanical reproduction and also foretold the changes art was to go through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for whilst the idea of the aura of a work of art changed, so too, did, the way in which art was produced, marketed, distributed and packaged. This was a direct result of the age of mechanical reproduction, and can be attributed to the demise of modernism.

With the introduction of photography to art, it seriously undermined the idea of the original or the authentic. The unique existence of the work of art in the place, where it happens to be, was questioned. For many, mechanical reproduction was the enemy that was symptomatic of the threat to inherited ideas of originality, authenticity and presence. In the 1980's a group of artists working with photography addressed photographys claims to originality, in their work. Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman were amongst them. They sought to show these claims for the fiction that they really were, photography to them was "always a representation, always already seen" (Crimp, 1993, p. 118) Sherrie Levine literally takes photographs



(belonging to other artists) and uses them in her work to bring her points across. At one of her exhibitions she showed six photographs which were rephotographed from a series by Edward Weston, of his son Neil. The images however, belong to classical sculpture. On showing them to a friend, he remarked, how he would like to see the originals. However, Levine feels that the originals would make you want to see the little boy and when that happens, the art is gone.

However, whilst the idea of the original work of art has changed it is still very much an issue in the minds of those who wish to bring our attention to the change. This suggests to me that modernism is not dead, because it exists for some, solely for the purpose of sabotaging its ideals. Some say postmodernism is just a continuation of modernism. Others say, it is not so much a continuity of, but a reaction against modernism. If postmodernisms' founding principles are an inherent desire to destroy the ideals of modernism, then surely it is the lesser of the two movements for it. This relates back to *the Death of the*





*Subject* debate. As long as there is someone, who wants to make another stab at modernism it will be alive.

The museum, which was another pillar of modernism and its greatness, also comes under attack. Kosuth didn't show in Galleries for some time because he wanted to work directly out in the world, however he soon realised that "there was already a discourse, a sort of circuitry of galleries and museums in which information could flow" (Kosuth, 1994, p. 76). Many times than not, work that is shown outside the gallery, is ignored because it is not recognised as art, whereas in the museum context, it is usually seen for what it is. Museums and galleries have a power that is hard to change. Both Gonzalez Torres and Kosuth wanted to disrupt the art market. Kosuth refused to sell anything from 1968-1979, but got little support for his work. Gonzalez Torres admits himself that his "stack" pieces would not work outside of the museum, but succeeds in destabilising its power and the markets' by letting people take his work home for free.



However, within contemporary art, there are those who ignore completely current trends' and produce work that is an embodiment of modernism and its ideals. In the 1980's, there was a return to painting and a renewed interest in the aura of the original whereby the authentic was detectable by the emphasises on the artists hand. This was a nightmare for many of the conceptualists who had tried to change people's perceptions of art. Kosuth claims that "it was only the skin, it had not the heart of art" (Kosuth, 1994, p. 79).

Sean Scully is an artist noted for his traditional approach to art. He uses mediums such as oil paint and paints with the help of painterly brushstrokes and devices such as formal reduction, repetition and variation. The conflict between structured composition and seriality, the contrast between shape and pattern, all allude to modernist tradition. He has devoted his whole career to the exploitation of geometric structures, namely the stripe. His paintings compromise vertical and horizontal stripes varying length and breadth, occasionally augmented with diagonal lines. He was very influenced by Mondrian and his theories of abstraction, with



his use of geometric forms and a limited selection of colour to form spiritual harmony.

Sean Scully has been accused of lagging behind the more sophisticated conceptions of art, which emerged in the 1960's. He has been accused of ignoring contemporary developments and harking back to traditional notions of painting. Scully justifies his reasons for producing the work he does. He simply refuses to be a follower of fashion. Scully rejects the 'anything-goes' mentality of postmodernism, however, if postmodernism embraces plurality and freedom of expression, where can we locate Sean Scully in it?

Some argue that Post Modernism is a move away from the modernist mix of high seriousness coupled with ideals of formal coherence. Others, say it is 'frozen modernism', 'a bogus concept' or the 'avant-garde' gone wild (Merquoir, 1986, p. 18). I would say that the borderline between modernism and postmodernism is blurred, and a certain amount of confusion exists within the debate. However, the post-modern world is a different one to the modern and it is





a time when there are different expectations about art. To say that postmodernism rises in the fall of modern myths of mastery and progress is true, in many respects, especially if one believes that postmodernism evolved out of a desire to destroy such modern myths and that it has been on its agenda ever since. However, as long as this is the desire, modernism lives.



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