



**School of the Art Institute
of Chicago**

Trash/Spectacle

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Part 2 of the Fiber/Material Studies lecture series FROM TRASH TO SPECTACLE: MATERIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRODUCTION, From *die Trümmerfrauen* to Jenny Holzer

SLIDE #1)

First I'd like to disclose a point of genesis for this very lecture series. About 9 months ago, after a trip to New York to look at art (as we Chicagoans are oft prone to do) I was describing what I had seen to Anne Wilson, by quoting a New York friend: "Well, right now in the galleries and museums, it's either trash...or its spectacle!" This wasn't a judgment call, or any establishment of hierarchies, it was roundly, soundly descriptive. The two starkly exemplary poles of this description were the Unmonumental Show at the New Museum

(SLIDE #2)

of new sculptures that were basically arrangements of assisted ready-mades, made of gritty street junk, and

(SLIDE #3)

Takashi Murakami's show, a retrospective that covered every square inch of the Brooklyn Museum with highly designed, stylized artificiality, infamously embracing a Louis Vuitton boutique at its center.

What I'd like to do is to flesh out this Trash/Spectacle polarity, in order to approach our contemporary art production from several angles.

First : To unearth other sets of binary oppositions embedded in this distinction

Second: To contemplate the function of these sorts of distinctions – who makes them, who uses them and why

Third, To look at a variety of recent artworks to suggest an *alternative* way of understanding them, beyond polarities,

that there exists a **continuum** of concerns, frictions, abrasions, claims, and practices which muddle up these categories; a field of *continuums* rather than distinct, separate, oppositional categories

And finally, by perceiving, observing, and thinking about these continuums, we may theorize or propose a set of definitions: How art functions **Today**, *for us*, it's purpose now, and, even, perhaps, its eternal necessity.

(Slide #4) Text slide

Here are some Binaries/Polarities/Distinctions that are frequently invoked

TRASH / SPECTACLE

underneath this is

CHEAP / EXPENSIVE

Literally, Economic value. How does artistic choice of material and process produce value in terms of dollars and cents and Euros and Yen?

Adamant demands for a separation between **ART and POP CULTURE** underlie the aesthetic battles of the 1950s and 1960s,

In the 1980s and 1990s, the distinction between the **solitary**,

Autonomous Fine-Art Object or Singular Experience was challenged by the model or embrace of the **Commercial Commodity or Entertainment**

And perhaps the mark of the whole of the 20th century could be understood in terms of an embattled

History and Tradition / beleaguered by the Unique and the New (through a series of *avant gardes*)

(A case in point is the Unmonumental Show> I could easily trace this type of practice in 2008 back through work by Jessica Stockholder to Allan McCollum to Lynda Benglis, to Robert Morris, then on back to Mark di Suvero, David Smith, Anthony Caro, ending up somewhere among Rodin's Burghers of Callais.. What seems to be the newest, most challenging work turns out to be the most conservative and traditional

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PHYSICAL / CONCEPTUAL

BODY / MIND

(many many details) / solitary unified whole (accumulation of details)

MODERN / POST MODERN

Louis Menand recently in the New Yorker wrote

(in the Feb 23rd, 2009 issue of the New Yorker talking about American fiction and Donald Barthelme:)

“Post modernism is the Swiss Army knife of critical concepts. It's definitionally overloaded, and it can do almost any job you need done. This is partly because, like many terms that begin with “post” it is fundamentally ambidextrous. Postmodernism can mean, “We're all modernists now. Modernism has won.” Or it can mean, “No one can be modernist anymore. Modernism is over.”

People who use “postmodernism” in the first, “Mission accomplished,” sense believe that modernism—the art and literature associated with figures like Picasso and Joyce – changed the game completely, and that everyone is still working through the consequences. Modernism is the song that never ends. Being postmodernist just means that we can never be Pre-modernist again.

People who use it in the second sense, as the epitaph for modernism, think that, somewhere along the line, there was a break with the assumptions, practices, and ambitions of modernist art and literature, and that everyone since then is (or ought to be) on to something very different. Being postmodernist means that we can never be modernist again.

I think this distinction between the meaning of POST, can also be useful when discussing practice: Are we past the divisions of disciplines that are no longer useful? Or are we still working through those disciplines, still trying to get it right.

DISCIPLINE-BASED PRACTICE / POST DISCIPLINARITY

And with **ART** and **CRAFT**, is there a pre- or a post-?

I'd like to begin to usurp or undermine these sorts of distinctions with a rather heavy-handed historical comparison:

SLIDE #6

After WWII (1945-46) in a bombed-out, defeated Germany, a phenomenon happened: the rise of the Trümmerfrauen – the Rubble Women. (Allied Control Council introduced a mandatory work duty for women—because 15 million men were missing in the war—the women were given the task to clear the rubble --) Methodically and scrupulously, German women survivors began to pick through the ruins, slowly cleaning and collecting bricks.

SLIDE #7

These rescued details of the Devastation were then used to reconstruct the new Germany, German Wirtschaftswunder, and the Economic wonder of the post war period

SLIDE #8

This ad hoc group of women formed a social group, working together with small repeated actions that would accumulate in order to build anew – to metaphorically create Hope out of Trash

Eleven years earlier, before the Trümmerfrauen, a woman named Leni Riefenstahl made Triumph of the Will.

SLIDE #9

Working for Adolph Hitler, the filmmaker documented the social / political force of the German people unified under the Nazi party.

SLIDE #10

Triumph of the Will was Shot on location in Nuremberg during the annual Party Day rally in September 1934. (Notice the somewhat different style of documentary representation between Riefenstahl, here, and the Trümmerfrauen)

SLIDE #11

The resulting film, a montage of dramatic crowd actions, reveals Riefenstahl's powerful talents to manipulate the medium of film, to bring together representations of individuals into one powerful moving Whole....

In perhaps the most effective, and undeniably the most egregious, use of art for political propaganda: the ***Spectacularization of Fascism.***

From this morally unambiguous comparison of Trash and Spectacle, let's fast-forward to last summer, here in Chicago, to Jeff Koon's show at the MCA.

Slide #12 Bunny

The former stock broker and MCA guard, makes clean concise objects that in the late 1980s were taken to be Postmodern jabs at late capitalist consumerism, lampooning the growing commodity status of works of fine art. Koons used the strategy of Marcel Duchamp's readymade: borrowing objects from non-art sources, such as this cheap, blow-up Easter bunny --- and hired other people to fabricate his work:

Slide #13 Bear and Policeman

In this Bear and Policeman from 1988, which stands 8-feet high, Koons conflates an "old style" craft --the quaint kitschy wood carving of a Hummel figure---with a **new** --er tpe of appropriation--- Alienated labor as commodity. He hired Italian wood carvers to make this giant Tchotchke.

SLIDE #14 Koons portrait

But in last year's work and in his MCA show, any vestige of conceptual artistic critique had vanished. The museum presented him as a homegrown boy done good, whose main wish is to please **us**, the masses, the audience.

SLIDE #15 blue heart

When examining this Blue Heart from the 4th floor galleries at the MCA, I was struck by the force of this contradiction:: between PR Branding and my direct experience of the work. Here, a crummy little shiny charm is blown up to monumental size, suspended from the ceiling--- in a seemingly precarious way, by some flimsy ribbon---But that pretty ornamental ribbon embellishing the heart is made of Wide Hard Rigid Metal.

This transformation was pitched as a friendly gesture to our lowbrow love of shiny objects. But behind this "gracious" gesture is a violent fascist grip. Like Albert Speer's, Hitler's architect or Riefenstahl's aestheticized propaganda,

Koons has taken a familiar object and a humble craft, blowing it up to monstrous proportions, manipulating our desire---manufactured as that may be--towards both *complacency* and *complicity*.

SLIDE #16 Red Flag The Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland, 2005

How then can we understand the often-ephemeral works of Cai Guo Qiang? His main material is fireworks and his most successful presentations, their spectacular detonation.

SLIDE #17 Transient Rainbow, New York, 2002

As to the dichotomy between tradition and the new, this Chinese artist has dug deep into his culture's history, while presenting unbelievable effects: brand new, dramatic, and complicated displays of light, color, smoke, and sound.

SLIDE #18 Portrait

I would say, in terms of Modernism, Cai Guo Qiang has built on the Chinese tradition by self-consciously examining his material and process, turning it into a conceptual project carried out with a collaborative team of experts and assistants.

His great commercial and arguably political success was evidenced in his firework display for last summer's Beijing Olympics, but his most effective piece

SLIDE #19 black holes Black Rainbow: Explosion Project for Valencia Spain, 2005

Was this one in Valencia, Spain. It was almost an Anti-Spectacle, in which timed explosions of dark smoke looked like they were shooting holes in the sky.

SLIDE #20

Let's look again at Takashi Murakami's retrospective. The exhibition space was completely designed – from a black box theater screening his cartoons, wallpaper and floor treatment printed with his signature representational motifs, rooms and rooms of iconic displays of paintings, sculptures, and prints. This show garnered much *popular* press attention...

SLIDE #21 Murakami portrait in front of Louis Vuitton logos

...because of the artist's unapologetic combination of fine art, commercial product, fashion, and the fashionable (Rap artist Kanye West performed at the opening)

Murakami unnerved the fine-art world by actually putting a high-end commodity boutique INSIDE his fine art museum show

SLIDE #22 Vuitton bags

You could BUY a Murakami/Vuitton collaboration – a bag, scarf, a key fob--- right there! And according to the salespeople, the product was moving quite briskly.

SLIDE #23 murakami CC

One could say that Murakami is a successful craftsman ALL THE WAY DOWN (as John Roberts would put it)

Using his well-tuned **craft** of management, he works with creative teams to design and produce **well-made** desirable commodities that operate equally well in the fine art and commercial worlds. Employing the **craft** of display in the museum and its stores, Murakami creates a finely **crafted** Brand

SLIDE #23 Murakami with print

But what does this *mean*? And what does *this* mean?

This is the artist in front of his most recent work in the show. The image is taken almost verbatim from traditional folk portrait of Daruma, the founder of Zen Buddhism, credited with Zen's introduction to China in the 5th or 6th c. Daruma was eager to meditate with the concentration demanded to attain enlightenment. But he kept falling asleep!

(Takashi Murakami: I open wide my eyes but see no scenery. I fax my gaze upon my heart., 2007

Some believe that a Buddhist priest was so upset with himself when he fell asleep while meditating, that he ripped off his eyelids and threw them to the ground. The eyelids sprouted the tea plant, and the leaves took the shape of the priest's eyelids. Make your own judgment call there.

There are countless legends, some conflicting, about this sage. The best-known legends say he attained enlightenment (Japanese = satori) after meditating in a cave for seven years (some say nine years) without blinking or moving his eyes.

Legend also credits Bodhidharma with cutting off his eyelids. Apparently he dozed off during meditation, and in anger, he cut off his eyelids, which fell to the ground and sprouted into China's first green tea plants.)

To prevent himself from nodding off, the sage, legend has it, cut off his eyelids! Hence this representation, in which he appears *stunned* at his new height of meditative intensity.

Murakami appropriated this image and story for its deep historical significance undoubtedly, but perhaps, by identifying with Daruma, he offers another message---that art-making in all its manifestations, and the artist in all of his or her roles, must be ever vigilant---exceedingly aware and hyper perceptive – of how art functions, is used, is received, positioned, ...how it is viewed, consumed, purchased. AND, at each turn there is a moral dimension: the artist must consciously take responsibility for each facet of this aesthetic clump as it interfaces with the world.

Slide #24 Black Blank

And here I would like to pause to consider what exactly art is:

Glenn Adamson, when he was here a few weeks ago, mentioned that those who are quick to make distinctions, between art and craft, tradition and the new, art work and the commodity product, modern and postmodern, the disciplines and the post disciplinary; distinguishing BETWEEN the concept, the materials, the process, the art object; decrying the OPPOSITION between the mind and the body --- will inevitably be called out for or will reveal some ulterior self-serving motive, however conscious, self conscious, or unconscious that motive is....whether academic, market driven, ego embellishing, or history making.

Therefore, I propose that art itself lies in the **continuums** existing amongst all of these polarities; that art is the very creation of those continuums.

What we parse out as art's constituent elements --- concept, materials, process, craft, making, context, and content...

In a satisfactory or successful art object – come together, are aligned, fall into place, make “sense”

...viscerally, conceptually, emotionally, and above all RESPONSIBLY—
responsible to the individual, the social, the historical.

It is that possibility of responsible confluence I will call “Art.”

And *Good* art is that which directly engages with the moral complexity of life, now.

Consider a few more recent examples

SLIDE #26

Andrew Lord

A respected ceramics master, presented new work, glazed, fired clay, hand made representations of his memories of stories, landscapes, buildings, and experiences

SLIDE #27

Ann Hamilton's Commissioned work for the Guggenheim's "The Third Mind: American Artists look to the east" Sliced up books were sewn together and dropped from the top of the museum's spiral. Their weight released a little contraption –

SLIDE #28

finger cymbals used for meditation housed in a white silk tent – which rode a rail affixed to the spiral ---all the way down---occasionally sounding PING!!

SLIDE #29

Trash – the yellowed old books, are translated into an elegant motion, creating a demure/quiet spectacle, as we watched, with bated breath, its spectacular descent.

Slide #30

And who amongst us didn't get a chill walking carefully into the golden glow of this floor piece by Jenny Holzer at the MCA last fall. Using a technology consisting of electric pulses and light, developed to sell to advertisers, or rather to sell time to advertisers to sell information, Holzer "delivers" a highly intimate content, in a spectacular form, that envelops the mind and body, aligning perception, memory, emotion, thought, in all their moral complexities.

Good art is that which directly engages with the moral complexity of life now.

Thank you

Notion of responsibility
To individual
To society
To history

To craft
To philosophy
To complexity.