Inside the Outside: Artistic Reactions to Politics, Consumerism and Culture

Abstract

This essay discusses artistic practices in relation to political themes, specifically reactions to Western consumer culture in a postmodern society. This type of politically charged art is examined from individual, collective and institutionally endorsed perspectives in order to consider the effectiveness of the message to the intended audience.

*The Interventionists* exhibition, hosted at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and collective media outlets such as Adbusters magazine are used to establish a historical framework for the discussion. The presentation of political art in this context is read through postmodern theories put forth by Frederic Jameson as a way to evaluate how ideas are communicated with the intent of swaying audience opinion. Artist Thomas Hirshhorn is also discussed as an alternate approach to relaying highly political messages using traditional and non-traditional means. By reading the visual and the methods put forth by these artists through the postmodern lens, the groundwork for evaluation can begin to be established.
Introduction

In “Designing a Cultural Policy”, Justin Lewis argues that in a free market, capitalist society such as the United States, industries tend to monopolize. Lewis argues, “The history of cultural industries is not so different, in many respects, from the history of any other kind of industry. Left to its own devices, free market capitalism tends to drift inexorably toward monopoly”.¹ The inevitable outcome is cultural stagnation: less choice, less freedom and a culture based on homogeneous expressions. Considering the context of rampant free-market capitalism commonly accepted in the west, where are we currently in this cycle of cultural consumption? Stagnation? Discussion? Criticism? Revolution?

Taking into account the proliferation of these cycles (as they become more rapid and extreme in our technologically revolutionized world), how does one begin to evaluate our postmodern state where the borders of definition are increasingly skewed, fuzzy and contradictory? I would like to consider these critiques, subversions and redefinitions of our consumer culture (particularly in the visual spheres of art and media) using Paul DiMaggio’s suggestion that “analysis of change in the cultural economy requires attention both to individual and collective action and to institutions of cultural production and consecration.”²

These “movements” can be considered in the validating institutions, specifically the museum. In 2002 and 2003, the Shirn Kunsthalle and Tate Liverpool museums hosted an exhibition called “Shopping: A Century of Art and Consumer Culture”. This exhibition gave a critical historical overview of the relationship between art and consumerism; particularly contradictory when considered the critique itself was ultimately consumed in a museum.

Collectively, movements such as the Adbusters Foundation and books such as “No Logo” explore ideas of culture jamming not only to critique and subvert the market, but change the interpretation to the consumer. This too can be contradictory as the case against capitalism and over-consumption must be made in the constraints of the current system. The problem becomes how to establish an effective campaign from outside to reach an audience very much immersed inside?

As visual public spaces, including billboards, building exteriors and sidewalks, are bought and sold as commodity, individual artists are reclaiming those spaces. Often a political message is conveyed. Others view public spaces as an open canvas for their individual expressions and self-promotion. Both approaches can create a dialogue with the public as they interact with the work on a daily basis, creating competition among advertising and art. But can these artists ultimately create shifts in cultural understanding? Is that the point? What comes next?

Postmodernism, Culture and Consumption

“…in postmodern culture, ‘culture’ has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend
Itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.”

For the sake of easier understanding, postmodernism can be categorized according to topics such as economics, culture, art, philosophy, and sociology. However, as a philosophy of interpretation, as Jameson’s quote demonstrates, these areas are interdependent, and theories about each topic can be shared and interpreted as a way to understand seemingly unrelated areas. This principle is important when considering how contemporary art reacts to and comments on Western society’s consumer culture.

It is first necessary to define the terms “consumer” and “culture” through this postmodernist lens, to help contextualize how visual art interacts with and affects both areas. The term “consumer” is interpreted here beyond the singular vernacular of buying goods and services. Instead it is used as a method of individualizing purchases, in a way that affects the psychological condition of the consumer. Similar to postmodernism, the term is read in a much broader sense that recognizes and accepts interdependent areas such as economics, sociology, psychology, and politics into the larger notion.

Culture is defined in a similar manner, as a seemingly singular thought that actually contains and interacts with many variables. It can and does function as a description of signs, systems and items deemed important by a group or groups of people. However, going back to Jameson’s earlier quote, culture is objectified as an economic commodity as much as it objectifies our surroundings. When discussing the two terms

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simultaneously in reference to artistic expression, it is easy to recognize the political connotations. This leads to the definition of the type of political art focused upon here: that which references culture as commodity and the political implications.

The infusion of power into these terms as they are transformed from ideas into actions, as well as the wide acceptance of the consequences of these actions, is creating reactions from artists with various intents and approaches. While some merely provoke dialogue, others aim to protest and generate direct action. Perhaps not all politically motivated art is intending to actually produce a measurable change, but purely commentating on issues deemed important to them or society as a whole. However, this method of communication can be discussed and evaluated in terms of approach and effectiveness in relaying a message.

**From Warhol to McDeath: Action and Reaction**

In the catalogue for “The Interventionists”, Nato Thompson provides examples of shifts in society over that last ten years, paralleling these changes with politically driven art.\(^5\) Thompson’s points can be categorized into movements in the political (leadership), economic, technological and cultural spheres. The 1990’s were a conscious march into an open-trade, globalized economy with agreements such as NAFTA in the United States and the adoption of the Euro in the European Union. The rise of computer and communications technologies provided opportunity for less developed nations such as India to become major contributors to the increasingly important (and globalized) information economy.

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Politically, as Bill Clinton took office in 1992, a mini-culture war was in full swing in the National Endowment for the Arts over the 1989 Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition. By 1994, as the controversy over Andres Serrano settled down, the NEA suffered major cuts in funding especially for individual artist grants. At the same time, President Clinton represented the counterculture baby boomer generation of rock and roll. This demonstrates the growing contradictions between cultural perceptions and political realities that would shape future artistic reactions.

The major revolution in the 1990’s was not one of political nature, instead it manifested in two unlikely forms: technological and, according to Thompson, marketing. These upheavals would have lasting and far-reaching effects on culture, especially artists working within a political context. As media became increasingly privatized and consolidated among major corporations, the Internet was evolving into a powerful tool for individual expression to anyone with a computer and a phone line. As a source of media-based information, the Internet would not only become a defining point of Western culture, but a method of cross-pollinating cultures throughout the world.

Bill Clinton’s inauguration to the sounds of Fleetwood Mac is one example of the “co-opting of counterculture” approach that is increasingly utilized in the aforementioned marketing revolution. Typically this co-optation comes from the fringes of culture, such as avant-garde photographer Cindy Sherman posing in advertisements for fashion designer Marc Jacobs. This creates a highly lucrative and profitable cycle of

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7 Ibid p. 15.
consumers searching to define and redefine themselves according to their consumption habits. As the marketing industry continues to search out the boundaries of culture as advertising tools, there becomes an increase in financial support from these private sources attracting artists who see the potential economic benefits.

Continued funding cuts in public agencies such as the NEA also impacted artists working in the arenas of experimental (including political), or as Thomspson calls it, “non-commercial” art by way of exhibition spaces. Many venues that encouraged this type of art either closed, became “virtual” galleries, or were forced to assume similar identities of commercially driven spaces. This forced artists to look elsewhere for discussion and display of their work. The economic and political consequences of the loss of private exhibition space paralleled the escalating discontent with the increasingly commercialized public spaces such as billboards and mainstream media outlets.

**Political Art For The Masses?**

With the increase of identity consumerism and marketing has come the inundation of visual information. Although arguable as to which came first, the result is the same – in order to inspire consumption, advertisers exploit every opportunity to disseminate their message to the public. This commercialization of public space, along with the aforementioned loss of private exhibition venues has led to an increase of artists utilizing these public spaces to communicate their message. This can be seen most prevalently in

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10 Ibid  p. 16.
what Thompson calls “the detourné, which is the rearranging of popular sign-systems in order to produce new meanings”.11

Naomi Klein’s book “No Logo”, describes these artists who are attempting to collaboratively and individually intercept messages from producer to consumer. Most often referred to as “culture jamming” which Klein defines as, “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages”.12 Culture jamming is attempting to rework the overly saturated marketing landscape by reinterpreting the messages displayed in public spaces. The most effective jams are “an X-ray of the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms”.13

Often these artists prefer to stay anonymous to avoid potential litigation from corporations or property owners. However, their work is easily seen on billboards, newspaper boxes and in and on public transit. In a bus shelter, a mustache covers the upper lip of a Calvin Klein model. A billboard for Joe Camel becomes Joe “Chemo”.14 Another billboard for the Marine Corp has the words “War Machines” added above the phone number in handwritten strokes of paint.15 Other artists prefer to prefabricate stickers or posters and wheat paste them directly over advertising declaring George W.

11 Ibid.
13 Ibid. p. 281.
14 Ibid. p. 282.
Bush as “The Real Terrorist in the Middle East” or the day after Thanksgiving as “Buy Nothing Day”

**Art Will Change the World – Now What?**

The effectiveness of these artists could be assessed using Paul DiMaggio’s suggestion of monitoring movements in the spheres of individual, collective and institutional actions, which provides a historical groundwork. This demonstrates the idea that art can be, and is, political by way of a reaction to environment and condition. It proves an existence through a timeline of continuous, although problematic, relationships of action/reaction. These consequential relationships can become contradictory; as the dichotomies grow more extreme they actually become closer. The fringe moves farther out only to be subsumed again, or the fringe moves closer to the mainstream. The result leaves the viewer confused as to where the message is coming from and how to interpret it. This manifests itself in examples such as Adbusters selling items in celebration of Buy Nothing Day and offering “a full-service advocacy advertising agency ready to create your next social marketing campaign”. On the other end of the dichotomy, Unilever Corporation hired graffiti artists to paint advertisements for Axe deodorant on buildings, creating discontent among artists typically united against corporate advertising.

While this historical approach validates the existence and context of political art, the intent here is to go beyond exposing the problems within the dichotomies. Perhaps it is more relevant to discuss the method and effectiveness in revealing the intended

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16 Ibid. p. 82.
message. In order to assess the value of politically motivated art these approaches can be re-examined through the previously mentioned frame of postmodernism. This will hopefully provide a starting ground to assess and discuss the levels in which art can effectively address culture, consumerism and politics.

“[Postmodernism] is clearly a class which is a member of it’s own class”.20

“…transcending your origins in order to evaluate them has been the opening move in cultural criticism at least since Jeremiah, it is surely a mistake to take this move at face vale: not so much because you can’t really transcend your culture but because, if you could, you wouldn’t have any terms of evaluation left – except, perhaps, theological ones. It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don’t like it or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too”.21

The question then becomes, is politically motivated art, such as the examples mentioned above, attempting to transcend a culture in which it is ultimately a part? In short, yes. This can be demonstrated by how political artists relay their message; one often biting in tone, usually clever in style, but not enough to convince the masses or provoke movements that reach beyond their inner circles. There seems to be something lacking, but what?

There are three elements relative to street art which, seen through the postmodernist frame, may lead to an answer: irony, audience, and environment. Irony is a consistent component in the work, in terms of using appropriated imagery in a non-typical method. However, the appropriated imagery is often incorporated with more images (or text) supplied by the artist. This is a less effective approach at presenting a

21 Ibid. p. 204.
message in an ironic tone because it can confuse the viewer with inconsistent medias and styles. It merely adds another element or voice from the outside, when the irony can easily be found from within.

To fully explain the use of irony, the above approach can be contrasted with that of artist Thomas Hirshhorn. Hirshhorn’s work is suitable in this context because similar to street artists, his work also relies heavily on reinterpreting mediated images to present work with overt political tones. However, Hirshhorn presents his message in a very different way. For example, a street artist who alters a billboard with a mustache painted over the face of a fashion model implies a message that they disagree with what the model represents. It cannot elaborate beyond that – which part of that industry is being disagreed with, whether it is objectification of women, the perpetuation of self-image issues models have on others, labor practices of the fashion industry, etc. In contrast, Hirshhorn removes the image of the model from the original context and places it next to a gruesome war scene. It is a bigger implication: society as spectacle in two very different, and ironic ways. Hirshhorn describes juxtaposing images as “the action of putting together two things that have nothing to do with each other…that’s where the politics lies”.22

A bigger ironic twist to Hirshhorn’s method is reminiscent of the critique/celebrate dichotomy found in Andy Warhol’s work. Warhol explored this through massive reproductions of commercialized icons such as Brillo boxes and Campbell Soup cans. There is still debate whether Warhol was embracing an overtly

American pop iconography or expressing disdain with over-commercialized culture. Hirshhorn takes the same approach with site-specific installations. The installations present a sensory overload of pornography, fake money, mediated images, ancient replicas and poor materials. Upon first look, the viewer is overwhelmed and unsure of the message. After more time, the ironic combinations of imagery and Hirshhorn’s message become apparent. Much like postmodernism, Hirshhorn is not attempting to create a new dialect, instead he is re-examining the relationships within the systems by his choice of images and the associations made with placement of the images.

Another indication of why political street art seems to be lacking is the attempt to communicate from outside the established culture, which essentially is the audience. A potential audience who happens upon an altered billboard or other advertisement is likely to be either apathetic and unaffected or interested and affected. Each group presents a different set of problems in relation to the objective of the message. The apathetic and unaffected viewer is very difficult to engage in the first place. If the intent of the artist is to disrupt the daily routine of the audience with a combination of shock and opinion, that doesn’t seem likely to happen to the uninterested and unobservant viewer. It is much easier to turn to any of the numerous visual prompts without further thought to the images and messages.

The interested and affected audiences are those able to recognize and decipher the imagery and method of presentation. This audience can be further grouped according to an inclination to either agree or disagree with the message. Those apt to agree may be a small part of the intended audience providing a sense of solidarity. However, the bigger
intent to provoke dialogue and shift paradigms becomes obsolete, a “preaching to the choir” scenario. The audience who disagrees with the message is less likely to focus on the issues being raised, and more on the method of “dirtying” public space. For example, the City of Chicago’s graffiti removal program is principally about elimination, not discussing the questions or motivations behind the graffiti. Public perception of street art is usually described as an unsightly reminder of the social ills of culture.

Politically motivated street art, through approach and choice of location, is intended to speak to and impact a broad audience. Yet it is a difficult task to reach the audience in a way that transforms ideas about politically and often emotionally charged subjects. An outsider’s approach of adding additional images or messages to an already overwhelming public environment of commercialized images is not a feasible approach. It is more pragmatic to focus on creating a valuable experience with a focused message, even if it is communicated to a smaller audience. The number of people affected may be fewer, but the impact is more profound and ultimately more effective.

Thomas Hirshhorn’s work is again an appropriate example because he was originally a street artist who continues to function in that role, but he is also embraced by (and embraces) the museum and gallery system. This presents a problem for some artists who prefer to stay in the public to relay their message. Hirshhorn originally refused to consider gallery or museums exhibits because he felt these institutionalized establishments were part of the larger hierarchal system of values he wanted to critique.

However, Hirshhorn recognized the limitations of this approach:

“I realized that, as an artist, I’d have to show my work in museums and galleries. But I also tried to show it in public spaces or in alternatives galleries or in squats,
in apartments, in the street. I wanted to be responsible for every side of my work. That’s what I call ‘working politically’ as opposed to ‘making political work’. I wanted to work at the height of capital and the height of the economic system I’m in. I wanted to confront the height of the art market with my work. I work with it but not for it.”. 23

Returning to the comparison of postmodern theory, Hirshhorn embraces the system from within, even using it to his advantage, rather than approaching the audience strictly from outside the system by altering the end product. Hirshhorn’s quote shows that he recognizes the importance of the audience and the difference between the public audience who happens upon his work and the museum patron viewing the work with expectations. As a street artist, Hirshhorn began by placing two-dimensional collages and found object sculptures in the street (sometimes literally in the street) but has since moved onto site-specific installations. These installations, whether built in public spaces or institutional ones are most successful due to an added element: interactivity between the audience and the art.

**Conclusion: Interactivity and the Implication**

Ultimately, Hirshhorn’s approach is likely to have a larger impact on a smaller audience. His work utilizes elements of protest art by incorporating examples of irony and political messages by choices of imagery and style. However, he follows the postmodern notions of examining the connections between systems from inside. A major part of the success of his method is that the audience is not merely shown juxtaposed images or protest language. Through his site-specific installations, the audience walks into the art and is surrounded by it. Demonstrating and critiquing a topic such as cultural

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23 Ibid. p. 21.
excess by encompassing the viewer (creating excess with components of it) is much more profound.

Conclusively, the best approach to presenting political art is to create an interaction between the art and the audience. Hirshhorn describes this as the possibility of confrontation and implication. Whether publicly displayed or kept behind the doors of a museum, there is a growing movement of artists who are going beyond general statements of discontent, and instead commenting on a specific area of culture and the ingrained politics. Like Hirshhorn, these artists are approaching their art and their audience with this same idea of interactivity. Collectives such as the Critical Art Ensemble group and individuals such as William Pope L. engage the audience in both public and closed environments. Critical Art Ensemble requests the audience to bring samples of food to test for signs of genetic engineering. William Pope L.’s *Black Factory* also requests participation by asking the audience to contribute objects they feel represent “blackness”. These artists are presenting ideas rather than representing them, by reexamining the relationships between what we consume and what it means, as opposed to strictly critiquing from the outside.

Societies will always have opposition against those who are in or perceived to be in power. Because corporations can easily be identified as our contemporary rulers in terms of money, influence, reach and power, it is to be expected that an opposing dichotomy will exist. Consumerism is a natural cultural target because it is easily

\[\text{\cite{Ibid. p. 26.}}\]
\[\text{\cite{Ibid. p. 35.}}\]
associated with the powers of capitalist corporations. However, as postmodern thought teaches us, the opposition is one that still exists inside the same system. There must be dialogue that extends beyond pointing at the failings of those in power. Whether speaking to a big or small audience, the artistic response must continue to involve discourse with the viewers.

**Further Considerations**

Discussing and evaluating political art beyond a historical evaluation can lead to numerous possibilities for further thought. Street art is not always created with purely political intentions. Many artists utilize a variety of mediums from stickers to wheat paste posters to graffiti for solely personal reasons. Further exploration could be made into how this fits into notions of publicly displayed art. There is definitely another type of street artist who is simply trying to communicate daily life, without the political implications associated with this type of art. That may be the intent of the artist, but can the public accept that?

Another area that could be further developed into a separate focus is the audience and the environment. The differences between a museum-going audience and a public audience could be considered in terms of how it connects with the artists’ intent. When validating institutions such as MASSMoCA dedicate an exhibit to this type of art, does it reflect the opinions of the public? Is it an indication of “radical” ideas being accepted by the masses? Does this ultimately have a greater impact on more people? There is also the notion of how this type of art interacts with the museum system – another topic Hirshhorn addresses in his approach. With the cyclical nature of fringe culture being
subsumed by the masses, and the constant redefinition of postmodernism, there are many
directions stemming from this topic to explore.
Bibliography


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