Copy As Original: Artistic Practice Before and After Appropriation

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Abstract

Contemporary art can be approached through actions that challenge the classic notion of originality and authenticity. Artistic actions regarding authenticity reversals were rather pluralistic before the Appropriation Art movement of the late 1970s. The first part of the research reviews key actions spanning from the Readymade use of utilitarian objects as art to the question of the power of authorship and knowledge in the postmodernist movement of the 1970s. Such investigations revealed evidence for both the practice and theoretical aspects of the Art Appropriation movement. Instead of providing a comprehensive, the second part of the research analyzes two case studies: the American-born, Paris-based artist Sturtevant and the Canadian art trio General Idea. With the discovery of Sturtevant's repetition of pre-existing works from the 1950s to the 1980s, the discussion aims to distinguish the blurred recognition between "copy" and "appropriation". Subsequently, the work of General Idea, such as the "Imagevirus," reveals the post-appropriation era of the late 1980s. Rather than reworking the works of others, these artists appropriated mass media's approach to disseminating information to the public. By comparing these two sets of works, this research, on one hand, traces the progress of the appropriation strategy: from object-based recreation to informative dissemination; from personal critics to technology intervention; from work of individuals to questioning the role of institutions. It attempts to look forward to the role of artistic practice and institutions in an age when originality is outdated, and the assembly of knowledge is not exclusively dominated by authorities and museums.

Keywords: Appropriation, Mass Media, Sturtevant, General Idea

Introduction

Appropriation is evident throughout art history. Romans copied Ancient Greek sculptures and replaced bronze with marble. Innocent or forgery replicas passively increased from the 1950s, driven by the demand for museum acquisitions following the rise of tourism. However, Western history was often depicted as a monomorphic progress with a series of events, heroes, and eruptions. Therefore, originality or origin remained dogmatic within classic Western culture. The age of mechanistic production before the First World War marked a new approach to artistic practice. Walter Benjamin appreciated the mechanical reproduction that erased the visual significance between the original and the copy. The classic recognition of originality started to fade. The productivity and speed-centered society pushed artists to align with current social values. The supreme being of the Genius vanished. Art workers, as they were willing to be called, took on a professional role akin to any other workers and rejected artisanal execution and aesthetic delectation.

By tracing the evolution of artistic actions challenging originality, this research aims to bridge theoretical discussions and artistic practice, providing different perspectives on artistic practice in the current cultural context.

1. Before the Appropriation Movement (1920s – 1970s)

Readymade artists relocated utilitarian objects by anonymous makers in the museum context and elevated as artwork. Such operation made two major contributions: triggering the link between the artwork and its particular site and "propose artists cannot make, but can only take what is already there."[1] Duchamp, the pioneer of such acts, embraced mental art and mounted a bicycle wheel on a kitchen stool in 1913. He did not intentionally make a piece of art or any functional setup at the moment of making. The object served as a delight installation in his bedroom until Readymade became an influential idea. *The Bicycle Wheel*, was considered as an assisted element with components assembled and modified by the artist. *Fontaine*, is a much straight forward contribution of a porcelain urinal exhibited at the société des artistes indépendants in 1917 without any noticeable assembly or modification at the hands of the artists. While most Readymade works dealt with ordinary objects without significance and were cheaply manufactured in large quantities[2], *L.H.O.O.Q* (first conceived in 1919) merged a few different aspects. The media was a discarded postcard without any value; meanwhile, with the print of the Italian Renaissance masterpiece *Mona Lisa*, the pencil-drawn moustache with beard and the replaced title *L.H.O.O.Q* by Duchamp. What was the statement here? Was it solely by chance of encountering a postcard in the street? Or did it contain some myths or homage to the cosa mentale of Leonardo da Vinci? Or just a joke in rejection of value and fame?

Guy Debord's logic of Détournement[3] may create some critical reception to such attempts. There are three situations of Détournement: Minor Détournement, Deceptive Détournement and Extensive Détournement. Minor detournement recontextualize commonly known elements in order to subvert traditional cognition. Deceptive detournement works on significant elements to update their scope of meaning. Extensive Détournement combines

[1] Crimp, D. (1993). The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject. *On the Museum's Ruins* (pp. 71). MIT Press.
[2] "…the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by aesthetic delectation…a total absence of good or bad taste." Duchamp, M. (1961). Apropos of 'Readymades'. Lecture presented at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 October 1961. *Art & Artists*, 1(4), July 1966.
[3] Debord, G., & Wolman, G. (1956). A User's Guide to Détournement. *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8, Antwerp, May 1956.

fragments of the previous two kinds. *The Bicycle Whee* and *Fontaine* presented a solid link to the logic of Minor Détournement, and *L.H.O.O.Q* appeared closer to Deceptive and Extensive Détournement.

While artmaking and collection became a "recognizable monetizing social form"[4] after the massive Duchampian influence, contemporary art practice during the 50s and 60s took very pluralistic or conflicting approaches in meaning and context. Although, Duchamp repeatedly denied as a precedent of anyone. Many artists were institutionally perceived as fellows of this companion form to distort originality and authenticity by denying aesthetics and extraordinariness. Robert Rauschenberg, for example, applied the hybrid technique of mixing painting and sculpture to present ordinary objects. Jasper Johns examined the significance of light bulb, beer cans, toothbrush and over forty variations of American flags through drawings, prints, sculptures and notes. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg's ten years loved relationship from 1954 brought them to the artist community between First and Sixth Avenue in Lower Manhattan. Their regular communications around The club (1948-1957, 1959-1970) with John Cage, Willem de Koning and Barnett Newman emerged powerfully relevant to the Abstract Expression. Furthermore, the initial gallery system was established with a number of exhibitions organized by art dealer Leo Castelli within the same artist circle.

Meanwhile, the capitalist mode of consumerism during the 1950s gave birth to the mass culture phenomenon. Some hard-corn Pop artists with a solid link to illustration and comics played the visual clichés game as image duplicators. Their protocol embodied many popular culture icons: Marilyn Monroe, Mao, Brillo, Coco-cola, Superheroes, and Micky Mouse, for example; elements from the world of trademarks, entertainment and TV commercials were collected, arranged, multiplied and printed by artists or others. Clement Greenberg may name this "vulgar" art system "kitsch language". Laurence Alloway called it "mass popular art."[5]Distinct from the Abstract Expressionists, they were these rather loud, naughty teenager-like characters who did not look back[6]. While Adolph Gottlieb claimed that: "Abstract art will last 1000 years." Lichtenstein teased: "I am going to get tired of comic strips in a year or two." Warhol claimed: "In a few years, everything of mine will be pointless."

> "…everybody should be a machine…Pop art's about…its liking things…because you do the same thing every time. You do the same thing over and over again. And you do the same…"[7]

Bringing commercial characteristics to the canvases was dangerous for art criticism. Warhol's radical attitude toward the "machine" and the heavy use of commercial icons could drag him into the dilemma of philistinism or as a betrayal of the anonymity declaration of the Readymade. However, G.R Swenson accomplished Warhol's proposition of calling Pop actions a challenge rather than defeat by laudatorily reviewed:"…abstract art tries to be an object which we can equate with the private feeling of an artist, Andy Warhol presents

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[4] Duchamp, M. (1964). The Afternoon Interviews. Interviewed by C. Tomkins at Duchamp's apartment on West 10th Street in New York. Text transcribed and edited from original audio recordings with permission from the MoMA Archives, *Calvin Tomkins Papers*, V.2 and V.3.

[5] Alloway, L. (1958). The Arts and the Mass Media. *Architectural Design*, London, February 1958.

[6] Lippard, L. R. (1985). "It is a product of American's long-finned, big-breasted, one-born-every-minute society… involved with the future than with the past." *Pop Art* (p. 11). Thames & Hudson Inc.

[7] Warhol, A. (1963). What is Pop Art? A revised transcript of Gene Swenson's 1963 interview with Andy Warhol, transcribed and edited by Jennifer Sichel. *Oxford Art Journal*, Oxford University Press, February 21, 2018.

objects we can equate with the public feeling of an artist."[8] Harold Rosenberg affirmed that emphasis on "kitsch" is the only way to discover and integrate the most up-to-date fundamentals of society. If you do not hear me, I will say it again and again, louder and louder. The weapon of salvage repetition in Pop made Duchamp an ardent Warhol fan. Readymade dealt with the mass-produced everyday objects within the question of what art is; Pop focused on the copy-paste and distribution of imagery material recognizable by everyone, equivalent to the diffusion of mass media. Warhol also created a highly exposed identity to the public, while Duchamp rarely made manifestations. With every life moment recorded, polaroided and assembled into the *Diary* and *Daily Pic*. Both the work and the image of the artist was transparent to the public.

> "The modernist copying is not a means to this end. It is the end. Or rather, it is the means to different ends."[9]

Pop artists perceived art through mass within the capitalist modes of artistic practice and distribution. In contrast, the conceptual art community (or the ultra-conceptual art, according to the definition of Lucy R. Lippard) took the heritage from Marxism and Dadaists to facilitate radical political and counterculture propositions. A small group of artists during the 1960s, who lived in Avenue A, D, and the Bowery, shared their close network among Robert Ryman, Lucy R. Leppard, Sol LeWitt, John Cage, George Brecht and Robert Filliou. They developed intellectual and radical work to defend their left-wing political affinities (such as anti-Vietnam war and Women's Liberation Movement). The focus was the democratic attitude toward dematerialized art rather than object-based interventions. These artists freed themselves from the art dealers, galleries, institutions or any established systems. In short: art is not for sale. Sooner after, the reunion with Flux and Happening artists promoted an intensive use of the printed format- artist books as the democratic form of distributing artistic, social and political ideas. Exquisite of the artwork was transformed to an affordable and multiple-like format for to serve the general public. Art as idea and art as action. The ultra-conceptual art moment from the middle of 1960s to the beginning of 1970s did not complement the favor of art dealers by the not-for-sale format. Art critics and institutions at the moment also somewhat ignored it with its hard-to-defined intentions devoted to countless, distinct and multi-contextual social events. Instead, Minimalism won popularity with eclecticism implications, which was still within the concern of anti-aesthetics with another operation of aesthetics. "Less is More, But It's Not Enough", Robert Huot announced on a banner of his New York exhibition in 1978.

Such conflicts between the left-wing community and the conservative power contiguously battle. Cultural movements called to action to challenge the archaeological orientation of knowledge and the abdication of the power of single authorship. The new literature revolution in France with heavy Marxism influence brought two pioneers, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, who both worked at the University of Paris VIII. Responded to what Roland Barthes claimed as "the death of the author" with "the birth of the reader", Foucault published *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* in 1969. He proposeed writing as "…a game…creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears". Foucault proposed that the author no longer worked as the creator of a story but to collect, archive, and organise stories

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[8] Sichel, J. (2018). "'Do you think Pop Art's queer?' Gene Swenson and Andy Warhol." *Oxford Art Journal*, 41(1), Oxford University Press, February 21, 2018.
[9] Ibid. page 12-22

told by others though "What is an Author."[10] Deleuz developed *Différence et répétition*[11] in 1968, which questioned the classic definition of identity into a non-hierarchical process. John Cage was one of the significant pioneers of such a concept by understanding "the function of art is to imitate Nature in her manner of operation."[12] As such, he escaped the composery control through the Chance Operation inspired by the Chinese book of change: *I-Ching*. The concept of the modern copy negotiated questions of authority, grand narratives, and genius. Following the abovementioned actions, appropriation emerged as a widely adopted artistic strategy from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Review such movement offers a path to trace the civilization process in the Western culture and the construction of public perception. Simultaneously, it may also provide an opportunity to understand the contexts of other cultures. For instance, classic Chinese philosophy emphasizes the awareness of time and history as a continuous transformative process, where originality is not considered crucial.

2. Appropriation Movement

Artistic actions concerning citation, referencing and replication were only given a name around the late 1970s as the Art Appropriation movement. Such movement, on one hand was prompted when re-photography and film montage were applied as the most modern tool; on the other hand, brought by theoretical discussions regarding the relationship between reality and spectacle in the age of mass media.

The Picture show, curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 brought a radical phenomenal to the art society. The exhibition gathered five young artists, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Philip Smith, who shared a kinship of claiming their ownership by rephotograph the work of others. Baudrillard justified Appropriation Art in social perspective in 1981 by introducing *Simulacres et Simulation*. This book is commonly considered as an update based on *The Society of the Spectacle* of Guy Debord. Debord instructed three stages of Détournement to perceive and challenge how the mass media substituted life into its representation. Baudrillard considered above instructions merely functioned for the past[13], when reality and representation exclusively merged in the 1980s[14]. Therefore, originality became meaningless. Artists at the time immediately picked up this new influence and intensively focused on authenticity reversal in the following years.

However, Crimp soon raised his consciousness regarding how appropriation lost its particularity when it became a postmodernism tool shared by different cultural aspects. Thus, Crimp reviewed and furtherly distinguished the work of Levine, Richard Prince and Rauschenberg. Levine rephotographed the work of others without transformation. Photography, for her, was the tool and strategy that another tool could perform. In the case of Prince, by redoing the advertising photography, he appropriated the institutional strategy during the museum crisis of the late 1980s: the acceptance of commercial photography. Rauschenberg appropriated his own work by shifting from a painter using images as material to a photographer who could capture everything as his art. Above all, Crimp pointed out that

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[10] Foucault, M. (1969, February 22). Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? [What is an Author?]. Lecture at the Société Française de Philosophie.

[11] Deleuze, G. (1968). *Différence et répétition*. Presses Universitaires de France. (Original work published) Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition* (P. Patton, Trans.). Columbia University Press.

[12] Patterson, D. (2008). John Cage: *Music, Philosophy, and Intention*, 1933-1950. ROUTLEDGE. (p. 68).

[13] Evans, D. (2009). Seven Types of Appropriation. *In Appropriation, Documents of Contemporary Art* (pp. 13). Co-published by Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press.

[14] Baudrillard, J. (1994). "(Simulation) is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." In The Precession of Simulacra, *Simulacra and Simulation*. The University of Michigan Press.

Prince and Rauschenberg emerged in a delicate position. It accommodated the institutional discourse of constructing the field of knowledge through arranged objects, while not intervening within it due to the nature of photography[15]. In short, the art of *Appropriating Appropriation*.

From Richard Prince to Sherrie Levine, from Debord to Baudrillard, from the implication of the significance of images to the incorporation of fragments to the new sublimity, these debates stated an explicit operation of juxtaposition and reimaging, where both the resource and the appropriation method were registered with the prefix of trans- or post-. Work-after-work, they can mostly be called. Such actions, were still focused on the artistic discourse itself. Crimp noticed such limitation and declared that appropriation was mainly a tool of "merely reflective, not productive of social relations"[16]. Crimp dived into AIDS activist art for its extraordinary insert of art directly into the public sphere around 1988. Rather than fixating on artistic discourses, AIDS art encompassed a broad spectrum of social struggles concerning the lack of healthcare, discrimination in governmental policy, drug addiction problems and the desire for sex liberation.

3. General Idea and Sturtevant

General Idea: The Canadian artist trio (Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson), and epidemic victims made the AIDS motif from the LOVE version of Robert Indiana. From 1987 to 1994, by timely showing its visibility in public, such as wallpapers, subway posters, magazine pages, videos, billboards, public sculptures and lottery tickets, the AIDS motif normalized the meaning of the deadly reality into a popular gesture. "Imagevirus", as General Idea called the project, can be referred to Burroughs' obsession of fungus and junk addiction. A new cosmos for artistic production appeared, encompassing the appropriation of mass media aesthetics and understanding the channels through which the message was distributed. General Idea's oeuvre is fragmented, evident in its size, subjects, approaches, styles, and content. While much of the work can be approached through the appropriation strategy, this approach simultaneously prevents it from being perceived as a cohesive whole. AA Bronson once identified the significance of reading in the group's early formation, citing books by Gertrude Stein, William S. Burroughs, and Marshall McLuhan[17]. A "collide-scope of interfaced situations", McLuhan described his book *The Medium is the Message*, may also express General Idea's work. McLuhan pointed out that the nature of communication media shapes our society more than its content. Electronic technology reconstructed the relationship between individuals and others: substance was substituted by process, and the public became the mass audience. The role of General Idea, thus, revolves not around individual elements but functions as a channel for reflecting real-time struggles, essentially becoming the medium itself.

In the meantime, understanding the relationship between artistic production and media can provide a deeper understanding of Sturtevant, "Copy as Original", the American-born and Paris-based artist replicated other contemporaries, such as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns, Joseph Beuys, Keith Haring and Félix González-Torres. She

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[15] Crimp, D. (1993). "...photography is too multiple, too useful to other discourses... will always participate in non-art practice, will always threaten the insularity of the art's discourse." In Appropriating Appropriation, *On the Museum's Ruins* (p. 134). MIT Press.

[16] Crimp, D. (1993). "Photography at the End of Modernism." *On the Museum's Ruins* (p. 21). MIT Press.

[17] Bronson, A. A. (2010). Explained by AA Bronson's essay, "Myth as Parasite/Image as Virus, General Idea's Bookshelf from 1967-1975." In G. Bordowitz (Ed.), *General Idea: Imagevirus* (p. 67). Afterall Books.

finally made her name recognizable as the mother of appropriation through the White Column show in 1986, a compromise she rejected[18]. Sturtevant brutally banished repetition at the beginning of 1990 and picked up video mockups as her new tool. *The Greening of America*, *House of Horrors*, *The Dark Threat of Absence and Fragmented and Sliced …* Sturtevant's digital work embarrassed the audience with the fragmented reality of violence, money and sex, taken from mass media. Two different bodies of work appeared in the same exhibition, The Razzle Dazzle of Thinking at Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris 2010. One section, Wild to Wild, featured Sturtevant's famous replications in a conventional exhibition setting, such as *Duchamp 1200 Coal Bags* and *Gonzalez-Torres Untitled (America)*. The second part, the House of Horrors, offered visitors a theme- park-like Ghost train (Le Train Fantome). Bats, skeletons, zombies, vampires, the journey began with encounters with Hollywood's horror film masterpieces and ended with drag queen Divine[19] licking dog poop. The choice of theme park might be relevant to Baudrillard's description of Disneyland neither true or false, but a "deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real."[20] And duo-setup could remind Crimp's assumption of two distinctions of appropriation through two architects, Michael Graves and Frank Gehry; one interpreted style from the past, and the other dealt with the current material conditions. The same as General Idea's work cannot be approached individually, Sturtevant's operation also works as a comprehensive whole. By positioning these two distinctive sections side by side, Sturtevant conveyed a clear message: the glorious art history dominated by masters simultaneously shared the dark current of the civilization process.

Conclusions

Sturtevant firstly confused the institution and art market by appropriating the author and then shattered the museum and built a noisy, bustling street by throwing a piece of dog poop. And, General Idea, guilefully, opened a cooperative shop, mass-produced, covered the poops with colorful sugar coats and sent it to everyone. The work of both artists evidenced a dramatic shift in art during the 1990s. On the one hand, they marked the end of the Appropriation Art movement based on authorship and authenticity; on the other hand, it revealed a new stage of artistic practice not centers with artistic reproduction but engaging to comprehensive social material constantly and immediately. Rather than understanding such shift as a result of theoretical progress, it is rather influenced by the progress of communication technology. Boris Groys declared that the age of digital reproduction is "primarily interested in itself."[21] MacLuhan named "mass-audience" the successor of the public with instant electronic speed. Millions witnessed the four days of non-stop live broadcast during President John F. Kennedy's funeral in 1963. However, the public only approached the gun murder by reviewing the record. In 1991, the Web and HTML Tags was opened to the public as the universal linked information system. On September 11, 2001, the world co-experienced the airplane attack. Many TV programs immediately switched to live broadcasting of the second and third attacks after the first crash. The media can capture and disseminate everything happening now in real-time, not as the past or future. Artists seamlessly caught the message

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[18] Sturtevant. (1993). "I am not an Appropriationist by taken of intention and meaning." *Sturtevant: The Brutal Truth* (p. 20), lecture at Salzburger Kunstverein, Austria. Quoted by U. Kittelmann & M. Kramer. Hatje Cantz.

[19] Drag queen, Divine is the protagonist of American counterculture scenarios in John Waters' film *Pink Flamingos* in 1972.

[20] Baudrillard, J. (1994). The Precession of Simulacra. *Simulacra and Simulation* (p. 415). The University of Michigan Press.

[21] Groys, B. (2016). Modernity and Contemporaneity: Mechanical vs. Digital Reproduction. *In the Flow* (p. 137). Verso.

and responded by engaging with the public domain and adopting a multitude of multidisciplinary methodologies in their work.

Relational Aesthetics, published in 1998, and *Postproduction*, which followed four years later, are two of the most widely circulated theories describing the artistic scene of the 1990s. Both were written by Paris-based art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. These books illustrate two common themes in how art responds to social, technological, and economic progress: a new focus on collective sensibility and the postproduction of other cultural products. In 1983, AA Bronson and Peggy Gale co-edited *Museums by Artists*, which revealed the initial actions of counter-classifying museums. For instance, Marcel Broodthaers appointed himself as the director of his fictional "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles" from 1968 to 1972; Hans Haacke redefined the museum's mission as "corporate sponsorship[22]." During the 1990s, with the advancement of digital media, museums finally recognized the urgency to introduce a heterogeneous mixture of what was happening here, there, and now. While "postproduction" is a technical term that refers to the editing process of audiovisual material. Bourriaud borrowed this vocabulary and applied it to describe the artistic process of transforming "script-like value" into "form". While working with existing cultural materials is not a new concept, what distinguishes it from art appropriation is that this activity is rooted in based on sharing. Artists such as Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Daniel Pflumm were presented for supporting Bourriaud's observations. *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*, together proposed a new sphere: art, creativity, and the construction of knowledge could no longer be viewed as thematic subjects, and the roles of individuals, collectives, and institutions began to merge.

Acknowledgements

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[22] Bourdieu, P., & Haacke, H. (1995). "What we have here is a real exchange of capital: financial capital on the part of the sponsors and symbolic capital on the part of the sponsored." *Free Exchange* (p. 17). Stanford University Press.

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