Bringing Back Affect: A New Approach to Post-modernist Art Through the Lens of Doris Salcedo's Atrabiliarios

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Abstract
In this paper, I propose that bringing back affect into the work of art can provide a new reading of postmodernism. In agreement with Fredric Jameson, I suggest that postmodernist art, influenced by a response to capitalism, amongst other things, evolved to the point where individuality, alienation and the self-affect were replaced by commodification and estrangement from the individual. For the purpose of this paper, I will use Jameson's approach to postmodernism as the end of the bourgeois ego that brings with it a liberation from any kind of feeling since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. I will use Rosalind Krauss's concept of the grid, Fredric Jameson's concept of the 'waning affect' and Craig Owens's reference to allegory to provide a theoretical perspective from which to support my argument. Furthermore, I will incorporate Andy Warhol's Dust Diamond Shoes and Doris Salcedo's Atrabiliarios as visual examples of postmodern artworks. Through the latter work, I seek to bring light to the postmodern characteristic of flatness and impersonality, and through the former, an example of an artwork that brings back affect into the postmodernist structure. Lastly, I conclude by suggesting that Atrabiliarios presents a space from which to question postmodernism's dissociative approach to art, as it brings back affect into the conversation.

Keywords: Affect, Postmodernism, Grid, Allegory, Shoes

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Introduction

In this paper, I propose that bringing back affect into the work of art can provide a new reading of postmodernisn. In agreement with Fredric Jameson, I suggest that postmodernist art, influenced by a response to capitalism, amongst other things, evolved to the point where individuality, alienation and the self-affect were replaced by commodification and estrangement from the individual. For the purpose of this paper, I will use Jameson's approach to postmodernism as the end of the bourgeois ego that brings with it a liberation from any kind of feeling since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling (Jameson, 1982). I will use Rosalind Krauss's concept of the grid, Fredric Jameson's concept of the 'waning affect' and Craig Owens's reference to allegory to provide a theoretical perspective from which to support my argument. Furthermore, I will incorporate Andy Warhol's *Dust Diamond Shoes* and Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* as visual examples of postmodern artworks. Through the latter work, I seek to bring light to the postmodern characteristic of flatness and impersonality, and through the former, an example of an artwork that brings back affect into the postmodernist structure. Lastly, I conclude by suggesting that *Atrabiliarios* presents a space from which to question postmodernism's dissociative approach to art, as it brings back affect into the conversation.

Shoes hold a very particular place in our wardrobe. Like clothes, they protect our body, show aesthetic self-expression and represent freedom or the lack of it. I have chosen to analyze two artworks about shoes as a means to visually illustrate how one represents postmodernism's emphasis on decentering of the individual subject through "the end of psychopathologies of the ego" (Jameson, 1982, p.1051), while the other questions that proposal as it presents a work that highlights singularity in order to bring back affect into the work (Jameson, 1982). Warhol's *Dust Diamond Shoes* can be viewed as a critique of the society of production and the emergence of capitalism while Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* can be read as a vehicle to bring back affect into awareness and consideration. *Dust Diamond Shoes* started out as an advertising assignment, and as such, led the artist to reflect on the changes that brought about the displacement of high art by the divertissements of comic books, movies, television and advertising. His work echoes a critique to capitalism and how it started to destabilized conventional hierarchies of wealth and status, as well as how the rise of mass production led to the homogenization of society in general. By portraying shoes in a context without singularity, postmodernism illustrated through the work of Warhol, puts an end to the ego or the individual by decentering the emphasis from the subject-psyche. This is what Jameson calls the 'waning affect,' a liberation from all kind of feeling up to the point where there is no longer a self to feel (Jameson, 1982).

I propose that Salcedo comes and dismantles their structure by bringing back the concept of affect that had been lost along with the self. Using her artwork as a critique of Colombia's long lasting social violence, Salcedo 'rehumanizes' art by bringing back sensitivity into the conversation. In *Atrabiliarios*, she seeks to rescue from obliteration the various forms death and silence take, when she presents an artwork made by objects filled with meaning, such as old shoes. In this particular case, she uses the shoes that belonged to women who had disappeared in different rural areas of Colombia. Salcedo's art is intimately connected with tragedy, as she adjudicates an intemperate and violent personality to the work by using the shoes that still maintain the imprint of the women to whom these shoes belonged to. Furthermore, by placing the shoes inside a box that is covered with an opaque translucent fabric, which can be related to the structure of the grid, she creates an allegory of hidden or silenced content which is a clear metaphor for the lives of the women who had worn and

shaped these shoes. The singularity of her work opens up a space where affect and sensitivity can be brought back into the frame of reference of postmodernism which had previously dissociated from this emphasis. I argue that *Atrabiliarios* presents a critique to postmodernism by suggesting that postmodern art can no longer not integrate affect into the artwork. This brings up the question: Should postmodernism be re-evaluated to take affect back into consideration?

Post-modernist Approaches

In his article, 'Deconstruction of Expression,' Jameson (1982) proposes that postmodernism emerges in response to the conditions of the stage of capitalism that have been absorbed as the official culture. In this context, postmodernism emerges as the succeeding 'cultural dominant,' characterized by "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality" (Jameson, 1982, p.1048). He brings into the discussion the idea of the waning of affect in postmodern culture to suggest that there is a shift in "the dynamics of cultural pathology in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (Jameson, 1982, p.1050). In summary, according to him, postmodernism refers to a context that counteracts the individuality and expressiveness that was characteristic of modernity. In response, this new angle that defines postmodern art evolves around the idea of the emancipation of the individual within the context of the work, and as such, the abolition of any kind of feeling or affect.

I bring up Krauss's article, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde,' to integrate the idea of the grid into this discussion of postmodernism, since it references the surface or surfaces that replace the profoundness and singularity of the artwork. Krauss uses the grid to argue "that 'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence" (Krauss, 1981, p.1033). The grid represents silence, a refusal of speech that does not permit projection of language into the domain of visual. Through silence, the grid becomes a barrier that protects against all intrusions from outside embracing the sheer disinterestedness of the work of art and its absolute purposelessness (Krauss, 1981). Since the grid refers to a system of reproductions without an original, it can be used to support Jameson's idea that postmodern art is characterized, amongst other things, by the loss of individuality and affect. Krauss refers to the grid as the "originary status of a picture surface" where "the putative opacity of the pictorial field must be maintained as a fundamental concept" (Krauss, 1981). *Atrabiliarios* contests Krauss's concept of the grid by providing profoundness both visually and allegorically that extends beyond the opaque and translucent fabric that covers it. As a critique to postmodernism, the grid in this context, can evolve to become a substratum from which a structure that integrates singularity, authenticity, uniqueness and originality can be built upon (Krauss, 1981).

According to Owens, allegory "is conceived as a *supplement,* an 'expression externally added to another expression'" (Owens, 1980, p.1031) and as such, "the allegorical supplement is not only an addition, but also a replacement. It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured" (1032). Similarly, Heidegger suggests that allegory refers to the new thing that results when the work makes public something other than itself (Owens, 1980). Both Heidegger and Owens can be integrated into the conversation of postmodernist art, since they both support the idea that the works' purpose is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, but rather to narrate its own contingency and lack of transcendence (Owens, 1980). In this context, allegory can further illustrate how by bringing in affect back into the

artwork, *Atrabiliarios* provides a new perspective that supplants postmodernism's emphasis on the loss of individuality.

By intertextualizing the theoretical concepts of Jameson, Krauss and Owens it is possible to suggest that a breach in postmodernism emerges when Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* is taken as an example of a postmodern artwork. This is particularly so when referring to the fact that postmodernism focuses primarily in decontextualizing the artwork from any individual or sensible context, since it seeks to establish a difference from the expressiveness characteristic of modernist art. Therefore, by integrating *Atrabiliarios* into the equation, a contradiction emerges, one where the emphasis is on the singularity and the affect that characterize the artwork. This is illustrated by the fact that the work is made with unique pieces that have a heavy emotional content, pieces that had actually belonged to and had been used by specific persons. Furthermore, this breach can also be illustrated when taking into account Warhol's *Dust Diamond Shoes,* which is characterized by the lack of specificity and sensibility within its structure and content. On the one hand, Krauss's concept of the grid and Jameson's argument of the waning of affect, further reiterates the idea that postmodernist art is characterized by a lack of affect; on the other hand, Owens's perspective complements Salcedo's work by integrating the concept of allegory as a variable that enables a new interpretation of postmodern art, one that takes sensibility into account.

Limitations

For the purpose of this paper, I will only focus on the postmodernist aspect of Warhol's work, that is, the loss of individuality and affect in response to the homogeneity brought about by the emerging society of commodification. My reading of Salcedo's work is limited to exemplify a postmodernist work that emphasizes the role of affect and individuality. Furthermore, I will not take into account the historical timeframes under which each artwork was produced. I will also leave aside the difference in form and style of both works, as the emphasis is on the contrast of Salcedo's integration of affect and singularity in the work with the uniformity and stagnation characteristic of Warhol's *Dust Diamond Shoes*. Structural characteristics such as shape, medium, color, size, etc. will also not be taken into account since these particularities are not inherent to the analysis of this paper.

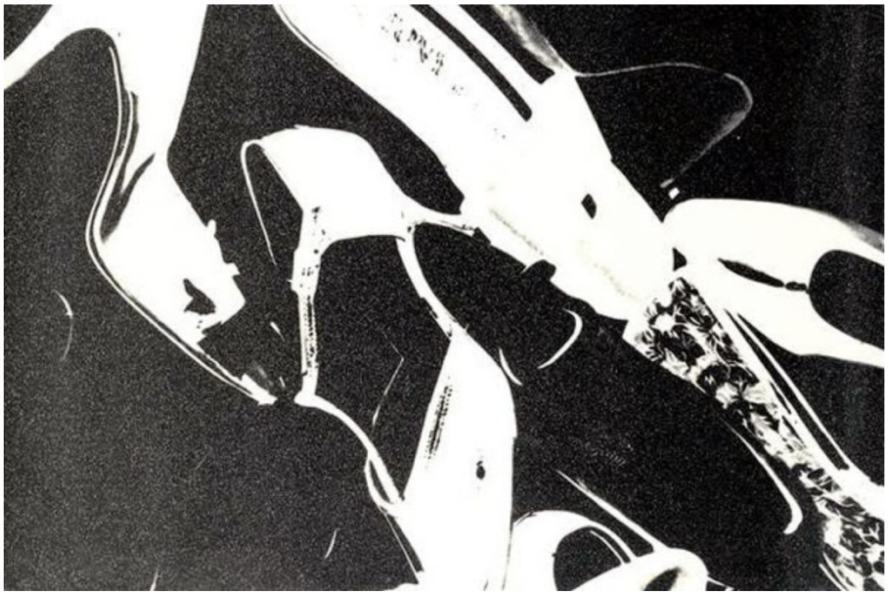
It can be argued that Salcedo's work cannot be used to critique postmodernist art, since it is influenced by a specific historical and geographical context, that is based on an allegory that refers to the social violence of Colombia, while Warhol's work refers to a concept not explicit to a particular geographical territory, but more to a global historical transformation. However, I reassert my position that in *Atrabiliarios,* Salcedo extends beyond the specificity of the Colombian context. Rather, it approaches the conversation from a universal standpoint as she questions the shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology, where the alienation of the individual is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject, thus losing its uniqueness. Postmodernism illustrated through the work of Warhol puts an end to the ego or the individual by the "decentering of the formerly centred subject or psyche" (Jameson, 1982, p.1050). In *Dust Diamond Shoes*, Warhol has taken individuality away by presenting an image that lacks particularity and uniqueness. As a result, there is a shift in culture, where the alienation of the subject is displaced by its obliteration; as Jameson suggests, "the 'death' of the subject itself = the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego individual" (Jameson, 1982, p.1050). In contrast, Salcedo's work *Atrabiliarios* comes and dismantles their structure by bringing back the concept of affect that had been lost along with the self. Salcedo's work

can be used as an example to present a critique to postmodernism as it ‘rehumanizes’ art by bringing back affect into the conversation.

Conclusion

I have shown that Salcedo’s *Atrabiliarios* can be used as an example of a postmodernist artwork that does take into account singularity and affect into the conversation. It presents an alternative approach to Warhol’s *Dust Diamond Shoes,* one that emphasizes the roles of sensibility and the individual. This angle opens up the possibility to revise modern aesthetics’ approach to the work of art as pure presence through the use of allegory as a representation of unity of form and substance (Owens, 1980). In this context, individuality, autonomy and affect can be integrated into the rhetoric of postmodernism thus creating a space for a new reading of a postmodern artwork, one that dismantles its focus on the loss of individuality and affect.

Appendix



1980-1981 | Andy Warhol | Diamond Dust Shoes

Source: The Indipendent

1980 | Andy Warhol | Diamond Dust Shoes

Source: Phillips Auction

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Exposiciones
Aprender e inv
Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*, 1993
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