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SPECIAL THEME:

The LIFEWORLD of the Teacher of Art

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TEACHING POSTMODERNISM

The end of metanarratives, the procession of simulacra, the ecstasy of communication, carnivalization, decanonization, hybridization, double-coding, multiculturalism, pluralism: these words and phrases are used to characterize what has been called the postmodern turn. Postmodernism(s) are a complex set of cultural and historical phenomena, easy to talk about but hard to describe adequately. What is at stake in the ongoing debates and discussions about postmod-

Figure 1. Postmodernism wall mural #1, completed by undergraduates and graduate students working together. Each student or pair of students worked on a section of the mural during the course of one semester. Across the top, from the left—topics were postmodern religion (Figure 4), decanonization, simulacra (Figure 6), the ecstasy of communication, double coding, parody; middle section—carnivalization, two sections dealing with meaning of modernism, pluralism (Figure 5), postmodern furniture design; and across the bottom, again left to right—fragmentation (Figure 3), the sublime, the unpresentable (Figure 7), a question about the political, and irony. A long string, in the form of a large spiral that started in the center, traversed the entire mural. From it hung small leaf-shapes with information about dates, key theorists, and so forth. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

ernism? Specifically, why should university art students, both graduates and undergraduates, engage in an entire semester of reading, writing, and talking about these and other themes? The purpose of this article is to explore those questions, not in order to explain the postmodern thoroughly—for this, readers may consult the list of selected readings at the end of this article—but in order to describe how I have taught this subject for the past three years in university seminars.

Because I am committed to helping young artists understand how their work fits into the larger historical and theoretical context of art-making, I decided during the past three years (1991-94) to devote my graduate and undergraduate seminars to postmodernism and the visual arts. I teach in a state university, in an intermediate-sized Fine Arts Department. Most of the students in my seminars were art students, although I did accept others from department such as English, American Studies, and Theater. Very few had any background in cultural history or philosophy.

Many of the notions about what constitutes the postmodern are incommensurable; it may be generally conceived as embodying a conflict

I met twice per week with groups of about ten undergraduates and once per week with eight to 17 graduate artists working on their Master of Fine Arts degrees. Each of these groups read essays by key theorists of postmodernism, such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Ihab Hassan, Charles Jencks, Linda Hutcheon, Susan Suleiman, and Margaret Rose. Initially I used a reader that I had prepared, but this proved to be unnecessary, as many important essays are collected in *The Postmodern Reader*, edited by Charles Jencks (1992). As might be expected, the material was challenging for all, and for some, exceptionally so.

Figure 2. Postmodernism wall mural #2, completed by graduate students. This mural included a background made up of pages of The Postmodern Reader, our text for the course, nearly all of which were altered, drawn or written over. Larger visual and textual elements were overlaid on this ground, which was then covered with wire mesh. Note the way the mural is divided into three sections like a altarpiece, the result of the wire mesh overlapping. Another element, a small box that emitted a sound (until it ceased to function properly was attached to his met. Two other large "flaps" at the top gave the appearance that the entire mural could be easily pulled down. This mural included no sign or indication of its meaning or purpose, a decision that evidently caused considerable discord among the graduate students. Photo credit: Diane R. Curtis.

During two of the three years I taught this seminar, a major project of the semester was the design and execution of a 6' x 12' visual description of the themes and ideas we were exploring. This wall mural, sometimes called "the bulletin board project," occupied much of our time, and it became the focal point of numerous discussions.

COURSE GOAL AND PERSPECTIVE ON THE TOPIC

The primary goal for these seminars was to acquaint the students with contemporary discussions about modernism and postmodernism. Over

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the course of the semester, I explained the nature of this discussion in several ways in order to orient students.

Since 1950, modern paradigms such as scientific objectivity, rationality, and universality have progressively succumbed to postmodernist skepticism, cynicism, fatalism, and narcissism. One result of this shift has been philosophical, theological, and artistic pandemonium. While modernity might be described as the attempt to realize Enlightenment ideals, postmodernity has emerged with a profound sense of uncertainty about what is to follow. Many of the notions about what constitutes the postmodern are incommensurable; it may be generally conceived as embodying a conflict of old and new modes. Some theorists identify this conflict in terms of a break between the past and present; others see the relationships more in terms of continuity. Although it is arguable whether there are "new modes" as such, I think that Lyotard (1984) and others are wrong in saying that postmodernism is simply a recycling of modern ideologies and values. New cultural forms and social relations are emerging, and these challenge the myths of modernism. Very briefly, I outlined the debate using four models.

1. Several writers, among them Hal Foster (1983) and Suzi Gablik (1991), have identified two poles in the discussion about postmodernism. Foster identifies a postmodernism of reaction that seeks to celebrate the status quo, while a postmodernism of resistance repudiates and challenges it. Gablik talks about deconstructive postmodernists who reject many of the modernist myths about art, such as originality, uniqueness, and stylistic innovation. Reconstructive postmodernists challenge the materialistic world view that dominates our culture and try to awaken a sense of responsibility for the fate of the earth. I find such distinctions useful because they emphasize the fact that postmodernist strategies move in diverse directions.

2. The second model is the most strictly historical, identifying a shift out of the modern into the postmodern age. This view concentrates on specific historical events in order to demarcate the boundaries between the modern and postmodern. Some identify 1945 as the decisive moment, the year European-Americans confronted in new ways the enormity of their power and their human capacity for evil. Feminists might point to Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 *The Second Sex* or Betty Friedan's 1953 *The Feminine Mystique* as marking the reemergence of women as a powerful historical force in the second wave of feminism in the twentieth century. Others identify 1969, the year of the moon-landing, when we saw the earth as a whole for the first time. Quibbling over a specific date is not the point here. However it is identified, the new *historical* situation we now confront is a primary focus of many postmodern theorists of culture.

Figure 3. Detail of wall mural #1. This student created an especially effective visual representation of framgmentation, using images of faces. Over the top he nailed and wound wires, which gave a strong three-dimensionality to his collage. The small sign at the top was the only overt indication on the mural of this purpose. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

3. A third group is not so concerned about historical relationships, but rather with culture. These theorists identify postmodernism in terms of cultural practices, which often take the form of critiques of modernist positions vis-à-vis the author and subjectivity (Foucault, 1977), or totality (Lyotard, 1984) or other aspects of modernist ideology.

4. The fourth position embraces the other two, incorporating analyses of historical developments with cultural factors. Fredric Jameson's comprehensive neo-Marxist position (1991) is one of the best known, but here I want to say a bit more about another perspective best articulated by Cornel West (1993). West insists that one must be clear about whether the term "postmodernism" is used to refer to popular or academic culture, or in a broader cultural sense.

In the popular mind and popular culture, the postmodern is evidenced in the eclecticism of Michael Graves' architectural designs; Philip Glass'

Figure 4. Detail of wall mural #1. Two students worked together on this part of the mural to create an especially effective representation of postmodern and post-Christian religious identity. Unlike the other sections, this was done with the aid of a computer and color copier. The result was a highly unified and complex composition. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

desequentializing music, as well as rap and hip-hop; Alice Walker's denarrativizing literature; Louise Lawler's and Carrie Mae Weems' defamiliarizing photography. Each of these forms of art incorporates aesthetic eclecticism, appropriating elements of past traditions for new purposes. To take the obvious narrative out of literature; to create music that repeats themes and minor variations, but does not develop these as composers did in the past; to use photography not to mirror reality, but to show us the underbelly of cultural institutions and beliefs: such are the strategies of popular postmodern art.

The academic mind/culture turns on the ideas of (primarily) European and American male philosophers and theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Jurgen Habermas, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson, Jacques Lacan, and Edward Said. A few women, such as Julia Kristeva, Jane Flax, Rita Felski, and Linda Hutcheon, have also helped to shape academic discussions. The disproportionate number of male theorists is curious, given that feminism can claim some responsibility for initiating important postmodernist discussions about such topics as subjectivity and the politics of identity and difference. Nevertheless, much discussion centers on topics like Lyotard's incredulity toward masternarratives, Baudrillard's procession of simulacra, or Barthes'/Foucault's/Derrida's decentered subject, all of which provide the impetus for an ever-expanding academic appetite.

But, as West has shown, the actual determinants of postmodern culture lie elsewhere: in the impact of market forces on everyday life; in the United States' displacement of Europe as the major global influence (and possibly the present displacement of the U.S. by Asia); in the polarization of contemporary culture around issues of ethnicity, race, gender and other differences in identity; and in the general bureaucratization of ideas. The breakdown of categories of high and low art, the commodification of culture, and commercialization of the arts are the results of these interrelated forces.

Finally, an undeniable feature of postmodern culture is pervasive and increasing violence and fear. Cynicism and nihilism are also widespread. This is clearly a grim assessment of the present.

All of these frameworks have helped the students come to grips with complex historical and philosophical material concerning postmodernism.

WORKING PROCESS

Each class meeting was based around a single essay by one of the theorists mentioned earlier. Sometimes I brought slides of artists' work that

Figure 5. Detail of wall mural #1. Pluralism was the main theme of this section of the mural, which combined text and images from different cultures in a regular rectangular format. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

Questions around identity and difference are among the most challenging that confront individuals, as well as the culture as a whole. Students able to wrestle with these issues in a non-threatening environment will perhaps develop deeper insight that will help them act in more humane ways.

illustrated these ideas; I always asked the students to think of specific examples as we talked together. Because another part of the semester's work involved a research paper on a particular artist or theorist, it was not difficult to think of examples. Toward the end of each semester, the students gave short presentations about their research topics; this brought forth even better discussions about the ideas we had been wrestling with. Also, of course, by the last few weeks of the term, we had come a considerable way in clarifying ideas.

I experimented with giving short introductions to some of the writers during the class before we would discuss particular material, as well as introducing the writers at the outset of our discussion. Usually I would try to give the students some sense of the intellectual history and background that was essential to understand a particular selection. They were required to keep a journal, with entries each week on the readings, as well as more general reflections about how their understanding was evolving.

After these introductory remarks, we would almost always incorporate a "round-robin" approach to getting questions, difficult issues, and the like on the table. As each person identified her or his question or insight, I would write them briefly on the blackboard; quickly assess their relationships; and then try to find a coherent path through the questions in order to organize the ensuing discussion. Sometimes a session would include small group discussions or dialogues in pairs.

The most crucial aspect of the seminars during two of the three years, construction of a wall mural, allowed the students literally to give form to and visualize the complex ideas that we discussed each week. Our seminar was held in a small conference room, in which we were free to use the long wall opposite the blackboard.

The first year I tried a completely consensual process as the two groups—one of undergraduate juniors and seniors, the other of graduate students—wrestled with how this mural should be designed and what should contain. A few imaginative proposals were put forth for overall designs of the board that would reflect processes of historical change. But the process of coming to agreement about an overall design proved, not surprisingly, too arduous. We finally decided to divide the bulletin board into rectangular sections, one for each student. Two of the most unusual sections (one by undergrads, the other by graduate artists) turned out to be where two students evolved their ideas in dialogue.

The second year, I decided ahead of time to give the project to the graduate students only. They immediately rejected the idea of taking an approach similar to that of the previous year's group, so I left the design decisions entirely to the students. This particular group was highly resistant to direction from me; it seemed a useful experiment to see what would happen with their process and the subsequent product.

OUTCOMES

In identifying the results of this approach to postmodernism, and particularly the experience of creating a visual equivalent of complex theoretical and philosophical ideas, I will bring the voices of the students themselves into the discussion. I always asked for their written feedback at least twice a semester; the following remarks come from that feedback to me. The students' voices are crucial here, for they directly reflect the outcomes of teaching postmodernism as I have done.

A few students seemed to have a grasp of the material from the beginning. (Many readers may find that they share the students' perspectives.)

Maxx, undergraduate: "My main understanding of postmodernism prior to the course was associated with art images. It seemed to be a term that's just been 'hanging around' for the past few years. I thought mainly of art that appropriated images, juxtaposed different styles one on top of another, and usually had a specific socio-political 'message' to it."

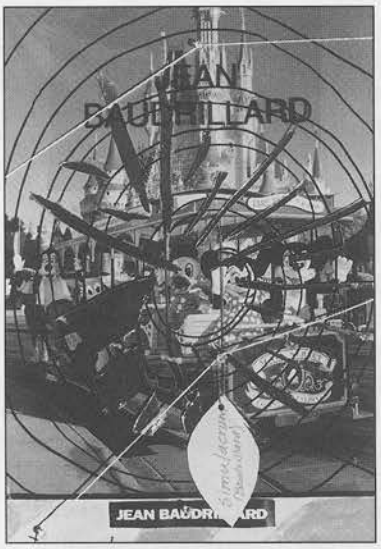

Figure 6. Detail of wall mural #1. The student who designed this section on Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum chose images of Disneyland and Disney characters, broken mirrors, and a spiral, which echoed the larger visual spiral over the entire wall. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

Brian, undergraduate: "I began this class with a rudimentary understanding of postmodernism from the realm of architecture. I understood it to be an assemblage of the past, integrated and hybridized into something distinctly new. . . . Postmodernity is not an easy subject to pin down and can't be summarized in one phrase or sentence. It is multi-faceted and takes its roots from a myriad of sources. I feel now, though, that I am more properly equipped to venture out into the apparently postmodern world."

Ruth, graduate student: "I was most familiar with architecture, including different historical styles in one building. However, the reasons behind this approach were not understood. I didn't realize that the modern international style didn't include any historical reference and that postmodern architecture questioned the metanarrative approach to design, the closure, the tyranny of the 'new'."

Other students admitted to having only the vaguest notions of what postmodernism means.

Rob, undergraduate: "At the beginning of the course I was not familiar with the term 'postmodernism.' I took it to mean a sort of hyper-modernism found in the mass media, bank commercials utilizing avant-garde film techniques, using a Picasso to sell alcohol, etc. Here all the forms of high and low art are equivalent and have been reduced to a sort of economic and social use value."

Tracy, graduate student: "I had little or no understanding of postmodernism at the start of the semester. I did have many resistances. I had always thought of myself as a formalist, and my inspiration had always come from modern art. Also, I knew understanding the theories would be difficult . . . I wanted easy definitions, straight-forward text, and visuals with captions."

Andrea, undergraduate: "I started with postmodernism as something currently going on, yet vague on details."

Amy, undergraduate: "Where did I start with postmodernism? I knew nothing, I thought it was a catchy phrase to describe performance art." Amy was also one of a few students who expressed a general awareness that visualizing is crucial to understanding ideas, but her comments also demonstrate the difficulty of separating modern and postmodern values. "Researching my area on pluralism was challenging because I had to focus on what pluralism is, what is the essence, what does it really mean? I chose my images very carefully; I only wanted to represent the true forces which are women's issues, the environment, cultural diversity and acceptance."

Figure 7. Detail of wall mural #1. Two students worked on this section. Under the liftable cover, visible in Figure 1 as the dark section in the center bottom with the word 'unpresentable' cut out, they worked on the idea of the un(re)presentable, gathering images that expressed the link between pleasure and pain. Photo credit: Chris Eckardt.

Looking for essences, seeking the true forces: such language reflects the thoroughly modern assumption that a broad cultural process such as pluralism can be essentialized or understood in terms of a few unique categories.

Tracy, like some of the others, spoke of being of the T.V. "sound-bite" generation, and of the unexpected rewards of trying to visualize. "My own understanding has grown from this project because it was a step beyond the reading. Not only did we read the articles, but we had to *show* what we learned and understood in a clear manner—to *visualize*, yes, finally *visualize* some main ideas we covered in class. I still like how Fernando put it one day in class: I can begin to see the cloud!"

One of the most detailed descriptions of her changing intellectual framework, and how this affected her art, came from **Michelle, graduate student**. "Fernando and I connected the issues of *sublime* and the *unrepresentable* or *unpresentable*. Originally we had adjoining squares, but it seemed that the depiction of these ideas could be layered. To paraphrase [what we got from this]—the sublime is that intense feeling derived from an interplay of pleasure and pain. The unrepresentable is like an extension of Kant's sublime in that (according to Lyotard) there is often a discrepancy between what we can conceive and what we can actually represent. This discrepancy involves the intellectual pleasure of conceiving and the painful reality of not being able to represent it. As a painter, these ideas have deep resonance with me. I am no longer obligated to re-present that which the camera can more efficiently show. So I deal with this desire, this play of conception and realization that is fluid, sliding between image and language, representation and abstraction."

Figure 8. Detail of wall mural #2. This photo shows a close-up of the small box and some alterations to the text pages that were used as a background for the entire mural. Photo credit: Diane R. Curtis.

Some didn't find the project particularly edifying, for different reasons. **Fernando, graduate student**: "I enjoyed working on this project because it did help me understand some concepts relating to postmodernism a little better. As for its didactic value, I think it would help people who already have a basic understanding." Curiously, Fernando didn't recognize that he had obviously influenced Tracy, even though neither of them had that basic understanding that he thought was a prerequisite.

Randy, undergraduate: "I appreciate it, but I don't feel it contributed to my understanding of postmodernism in a significant way. It helped me to represent Lyotard, to reiterate what Lyotard had said, but even that was somewhat narrow. The bulletin board was useful in manipulating specifics, but it is truly *sublime*, very difficult to even get a tentative hold on visually."

Miles, graduate student: "There was not enough time to develop the most appropriate imagery for the purpose of visually explaining a given concept. Because so much of postmodernism is expressed through words only, it is sometimes difficult for me as a visual artist to comprehend so many concepts simultaneously. But because the project placed so many concepts visually, it did help me to *see* all the elements."

Rod, graduate student: *"As we discussed in class, the major problem of the board is that it doesn't give enough information for the viewer who does not have a background in postmodernism."*

CONCLUSION

What was, finally, clarified? Several of the critics were able to articulate answers to this question. **Rod** expressed his sense of this quite vividly: "My own understanding has changed drastically because of the structure of the discussions. I have heard about small groups that discuss literature and film, but have never been part of a group like ours. Because postmodern ideas and critics are throughout culture, I found my interests in science, anthropology, literature, philosophy, religion, and the visual arts to be constantly stimulated. Through my final project [a report on Barbara Kruger's work], I have a much better understanding of feminist philosophy. I also feel that not understanding postmodernism would put one at a disadvantage in understanding contemporary life."

Miles: "I often glanced to the board

during class to reference an idea or topic and its vernacular. Even with its weaknesses, it had a summarizing effect. Not a totalizing endpoint, but a display of multiple ideas served up together, a kind of postmodern smorgasbord."

Rob offered one of the most original and witty assessments. "This map of the postmodern is one of those increasingly detailed west coast Thomas Guides that diagram all the individual neighborhoods. The symbolic unifying thread placed over the top of it calls attention to the fact that, like George Bush's presidency, these thousand points of light lack some important unifying element. If it had been done more chaotically in the spirit of the happenings, with everyone vying for representational space and ignoring their square in order to seek their wildest personal ends, the overall composition would have had more consistency! To be thorough, the entire thing could be re-fragmented, edited, and double-coded by each individual according to their own reading; like the exquisite corpse, we would then be left with simulacra of the postmodern landscape rather than a single representation of it."

Randy's final comments may act as a summary of the entire project: "Was it worth it? In some ways it really broke the flow of the class. But I do like it and appreciate the board. It is complex. It keeps your attention. It lures you to study it." And that was actually my own goal: that the students themselves would be able to study the mural in order to deepen their insight and understanding of this material.

To return now to my earlier question: why should university art students spend a semester—an admittedly short time—grappling with the complex cultural issues surrounding modernism and postmodernism? In a program where undergraduate and graduate students may be required to take only two or three seminars in the art history of all periods, plus theory and criticism, this is justifiable for several reasons.

First, to develop even a rudimentary understanding of the present in which one lives, though difficult, will help in negotiating contemporary life, as Rod noted. An artist who is conversant with the major theoretical debates of our time may be assisted with such pragmatic issues as getting a job, especially if he or she is able to take a stand about the debate. From my standpoint, however, this practical gain is not the most important.

Second, our time could well be described as multicultural, pluralist, increasingly international, and diverse; and curricula in every discipline reflect this change. Such language points to the interaction of cultural traditions in the United States and in the world today. Questions around identity and difference are among the most challenging that confront individuals, as well as the culture as a whole. Students able to wrestle with these issues in a non-threatening environment will perhaps develop deeper insight that will help them act in more humane ways.

Third—and this is a conclusion strongly supported by my experience teaching postmodernism—cynicism and nihilism among students, including artists, can be challenged by helping them to develop a more comprehensive and critical perspective on the present. Most significantly, this also gives them a sense of possibility about the future. Understanding better where we are culturally will allow aspiring artists to create powerful and persuasive images of where we might be headed. Indeed, developing new, and alternative, visions of the future may be one of the most pressing needs of our time.

Deborah J. Haynes is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Washington State University, Pullman.

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