

# Complicity with Sign Systems Postmodernism in the Field of Visual Arts<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Postmodernism in the arts is double-faced: It not only concerns 'neo-expressionist' painting, but also a performative turn, initially diagnosed by Michael Fried. Influenced by poststructuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault, the art scene underwent a significant change since the late seventies: Language and other sign systems took the lead so that the authority of the author was undermined, the work became part of a relational network, the beholder turned into a producer. Photography and performance were the media to articulate the change. It is argued that seemingly traditional media like painting in fact adopted a transmedia approach. Painting itself has a performative character, but it was also used to document performances and to perform a public persona. A focus on signs suggested a practice of complicity: artists performed in the growing art market and pleaded for an 'affirmative critique' that would change structures by inhabiting it. At the end of the eighties, AIDS activism put an end to this kind of postmodernist opportunism and reintroduced a sense of struggle. This caused an essential critique of the language approach and brought a new understanding of critical artistic practice, again connecting to the overall development towards performativity.

## Introduction

Visual art's modernity ended twice: In 1967, Michael Fried raised a furious critique against the minimalists, because they attacked sculpture and transgressed borders set by modernism. The second end of modernity came about ten years later. It was the militant negation of 'dematerialized' post-conceptual art practices that – so it seemed – had lost all visual impact. This second coming of postmodernism in the arts was easier to identify: Architects like Robert Venturi or Michael Graves had done the same ten years before. Their eclectic buildings were aimed at ending functionalist ideology by re-introducing ornament and narration (Jencks 1977).

Fried disliked minimalism because of its 'theatricality.' A purist's stance: The kind of artwork he promoted was an aesthetic, organic whole, with the author as its origin and timeless meaning as its destination. The integrity of the work would be spoiled, Fried thought, by "what lies between the arts..." (Fried 1968, 142), the mixture of text and image, sculpture, and performance. It is not without irony that what disqualified minimalism for Fried – its performativity – became the core of postmodern artistic practice. The act, connecting artist and audience in a new way and deconstructing the 'work,' stayed the leitmotiv of artistic practice until the nineties, after 'Postmodernism' went out of fashion.

The twofold beginning of postmodernity in the arts indicates the complexity of the issue: In architecture, we deal with buildings labeled 'postmodern,' but only a few paintings or sculptures could be named as such. The 'late' postmodernism – neo-expressionist painting – lays a false trail. In the visual arts, 'postmodern' relates more to (immaterial) semiotic structures, performative actions, and a re-definition of art as an institution, than to specific styles. This connects postmodernism to poststructuralism. While the term 'postmodern' went out of fashion in the late eighties, the conceptual changes connected to its doppelganger kept on working (Foster 1984). Whoever deals with the impact of postmodernism on visual art will come across practices informed by poststructuralist theory already transforming the art world at the beginning of the postmodernist discourse in the mid-sixties and still resonating in post-postmodernism during the late eighties and early nineties.

## Author, Work, Beholder: A Primer in 'Postmodernism'

In late September 1977, an exhibition opened at New York's Artist Space that made history: 'Pictures' collected five artists' work that – as curator Douglas Crimp claimed – were “picture-users” more than “picture-makers” (Crimp 1977, s.p.).<sup>2</sup> The exhibiting artists belonged to the first generation that grew up in a media setting of magazines, cinema, and television. They all shared the experience that their reality was not mirrored but *defined* by pictures. As Crimp explained in his catalogue: “To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in cinema. Next to these pictures, firsthand experience begins to retreat...” (Crimp, *ibid.*). It, therefore, became imperative to understand the picture itself. This is why these artists do not try to invent, but apply pictures already in public use. By taking up the existing discourse of images, they embrace its social and political function, they evaluate and redefine it. In his short film 'The Jump,' Jack Goldstein reuses images of a diver. He isolates them on a black background, he rotoscopes them (Fig.1). Through his treatment, the meaning of the original is transformed. One 'text' is doubled by another. The quoted image is split in the sense that beneath its new, 'allegorical' (Owens 1980) surface the traditional meaning is always pertinent. The new postmodern picture implies two images constantly referring to each other. The single image is no longer a funnel collecting every aspect of reference and meaning, instead it becomes 'centrifugal' (Joselit 2013, 43f).



Figure 1: Jack Goldstein, *Still from the Jump*, 1978.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

As the footnotes imply, Crimp drew not only on Saussure, but also on Benjamin and Lacan. Most notably, his understanding is shaped by Roland Barthes, whose first collection of essays was published in English in the year the exhibition took place. One of the essays in 'Image-Music-Text' is called 'From Work to Text'.<sup>3</sup> The artwork, which in modern times was taken as an aesthetic, symbolic whole, encased by an origin (i.e., an author) and an end (i.e., a represented reality or transcendent meaning) (Foster 1985, 129), becomes an element of a 'text', taken as a semiotic structure reaching far beyond the singular author or a community of experts. Crimp would be supported in his interpretation by his familiarity with Robert Smithson, who connected sculptural 'non-sites' in an exhibition to 'absent' sites outside in the landscape (Fig. 2-3). The 'work' is not the sculpture in the museum, not the accompanying photo of the site or a map. The 'work' was defined as an assemblage of all this.



Figure 2: Robert Smithson, *A Nonsite*, Franklin, New Jersey, 1968.

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© Robert Smithson



Figure 3: As a reference to Robert Smithson's art, we present a sample of one of his best-known works, taking into account his reputation in Land Art. Photograph of Robert Smithson's earthwork, Spiral Jetty, located at Rozel Point, Utah on the shore of the Great Salt Lake. Photo by Netherzone, January 2004. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

If production becomes dominated by reproduction, it not only changes the character of the artwork, but also the position of the author. Far from being an autonomous individual, free to articulate own ideas or phantasies, the postmodern author is subjected to conventional sign systems. "As much as we speak language, language speaks us" (Burgin 1982, 145). As a postmodernist author you can only change systems by participating. In that, the author becomes more of a beholder. And, vice versa, the beholder is activated as a creator: She becomes a co-producer of the work as every 'use' of an artwork necessitates the activation of chains of signifiers. The re-articulation of the art institution in postmodernism changes significant concepts of modern aesthetics: "Modernist notions of autonomy, authenticity, originality, and self-referentiality are now... less hallowed than hollowed." (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 86).

## Photography and Performance

Minimalism was a movement with a double face: It was open to a 'theatrical' and performative understanding of art. But the radical reductive way in which artists like Donald Judd arrived at their 'specific objects' (Judd 1965) was the last appearance of a modernist 'cleaning process' (Latour 2008, 19). What language could an artist use if sculpture or painting, imagination or depiction was 'tested away' and out of use?<sup>4</sup> Conceptual artists turned to "ready-made sign systems" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 88): language and photography. Language would allow to construct a piece without building it, as Lawrence Weiner used to say. In this way, language did not only help to avoid a marketable product, but it also established a relation to something immaterial, imaginary.

When Robert Barry presented photographs of a gas container on the street in Beverly Hills, did he really – as the title claims – release 1 liter of krypton gas into the atmosphere? Photography had the advantage of being a mechanically reproducible image-making technology, while connecting to mass culture as a comprehensive tool and to the political control it had inscribed (Fig. 4). This was not the 'arty' photography known as 'pictorialism,' mimicking the expression and subjectivity of painting. It was photo-journalism which became the paradigm of conceptual artists.

Looking at works of Robert Smithson, Dan Graham and Douglas Huebler, Jeff Wall (1995) detects an attitude that Paul Strand, Brassai and Walker Evans introduced through casual observation. The picture makes its appearance in practice, relinquishing the sensuousness of surface and the preparatory process of composition, and emerges on the wing, out of a photographer's complex social engagement. It records something significant in the event. Wall highlights the mimetic character of this 'artistic' type of photo-journalism: "The profusion of new forms, processes, materials and subjects... was to a great extent stimulated by mimetic relationships with other social production processes..." (Wall, 1995, 35) Artists imitated photo-journalists to create pictures. Their photography was a performance.



Figure 4: Robert Barry, Inert Gas Series, 1969. © Robert Barry.  
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For more, you can subscribe to the podcast on Robert Barry, James Merle Thomas by Modern Art  
Notes, posted by SoundCloud and shared by Art Style Magazine stories.  
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Wall enriches the performative observation of Michael Fried: To produce art after modernism, you have to enter sign systems, social systems of behavior, institutions. The allegorical character does not only apply to images but also behavior. Mierle Ukeles Leiderman adopts the role of a cleaning woman to conceptualize the hidden institutional structures of the museum (Fig. 5). In this sense, social action is to be taken like photography and language: they are all 'vessels' for artistic thinking. Performance, because of its temporary character, appears to be 'incomplete' like Smithson's non-sites, relying on the re-materialization in photography. It has the photographic visualization deeply inscribed into its volatile structure (Auslander 2008). The performance proved to be elliptic like conceptual art as already its programming anticipated the finitude of the event and its complementing documentation. In this sense, as well, the works of conceptual artists like Richard Long or Bruce Naumann can be classified as 'performative':

"The picture is represented as the subsidiary form of an act, as photo-documentation. It has become that, however, by means of a new kind of photographic mise-en-scène. That is, it exists and is legitimated as continuous with the project of reportage by moving in precisely the opposite direction, toward a completely designed pictorial method, an introverted masquerade that plays games with the inherited aesthetic proclivities of art-photography-as-reportage" (Wall 1995, 36).





Figure 5: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Outside*,  
Performance view Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford 1973  
Image available on YouTube Channel Smart History reproduced under "Fair Use" condition.  
Atheneum Museum of Art © Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

## Painting as 'Institutional Critique'?

How can we connect a 'postmodern' artistic practice to the stereotype of postmodern art, the neo-expressionist painting of the early eighties? Was it as retardataire as critics like Benjamin Buchloh (1980) or Hall Foster (1984) and their many followers among journalists claimed? "Were critics' claims and artists' works really in sync?" asked Alison Pearlman in 2003, stressing the continuity between this kind of painting with Andy Warhol and conceptual art. In 'Flashback' Philipp Kaiser (2005) brought together protagonists of the epoch to revise their judgments and look for a conceptual backbone in neo-expressionistic painting because "The phenomenon of figurative painting...was in many cases not long-lived. Yet the myth of a subject-centered, anticonceptual gut-level painting still tenaciously persists in many people' minds." (ibid., 16) "Could it be possible that we might find in apparently expressive gestures also forms of an institutional critique?" asked Isabelle Graw (in Kaiser – moderator, 50). "Could for example Martin Kippenberger be considered an artist critical of institutions?" To embed eighties' painting into a narration that connects the achievements of the seventies and the conceptual approach of the so-called Pictures Generation, we must overcome the fixation with the seemingly retrograde painting and look for the very practices surrounding it.

In the eighties, painting changed by absorbing elements of installation art, photography, and performance so that Helena Kontova (1989, 86) even talks about a 'multimedia approach' when she observes that painting is just a "fragment of a more complex situation." Painting became – like photography – a pictorial reproduction of an event or installation. Salome would 'restage' his early performances in colorful pictures as did Cindy Sherman, reenacting her public acts as nurse or secretary in public spaces in photography. It is important to mention the cinematic background of this type of painting. K.H. Hödicke, the influential artist and mentor, would say that a movie is nothing but 240 paintings on one meter. (See Schmidt-Wulffen, 1985, 37). In this sense the painting is related to an ongoing activity of which it is illuminating only a single stage, connecting to a before and an after. The often-used reference to expressionism should be replaced by another spontaneous flux, that of the cinema. Nearly every artist of this time has a cinema experience, admiring cinema's temporality, mode of narration, and transience.

To paint after a photographic template became the rule: This holds for Gerhard Richter as well as for Sigmar Polke. In Martin Kippenberger's studio, you could find a basket filled with photos, comics, jokes, where he and his fellow artists – Büttner, Oehlen, Herold – could help themselves. With this use of ready-made images the painter, in contrast to the seemingly subjective form of expression, adapts to a preexisting visual language, to a social system (Fig. 6). As Albert Oehlen said: "We read the paper in the morning and paint around noon. The state is responsible for the results." (Schmidt-Wulffen, 1985, p. 56). These artists would immerse themselves in what is, so that the political status quo could document itself on the canvas. (One should not forget that the militant political context artists like Albert Oehlen or Werner Büttner left before they became 'painters').<sup>5</sup>



Figure 6: Martin Kippenberger, Untitled, Series Dear painter, Paint for Me. Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 2012. Photo by Esther Westerveld, July 9, 2012. Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.

What differentiates painting from photography is a refusal of technical reproduction. However, these painters don't introduce manual labor to open a stage for the unique, expressive gesture; on the contrary, they test how convention governs their bodily movements and their imagination. From the social protocol of the gesture it is not far to create a public persona as a testimony: Martin Kippenberger created a rich oeuvre of painterly identities, including Superman and the 'Eiermann,' who gives birth to art like a hen to eggs. When describing the postmodernist paradigm, 'performance' has different connotations, acts on several levels. It does not only denote the artistic genre of performance; it also refers to the practical use of signs, to the practice of the artist. But it also connotes the blurring transition between the artist's public persona and how it is constructed by doing art (in contrast to performing the life of a critic, curator, or teacher).<sup>6</sup>

## Complicity

The art market, until the eighties marginal for artistic practice, suddenly opened a specific performative stage. Beginning in the mid-seventies, it underwent a drastic change. The number of artists in the US grew between 1970 and 1980, by around 67%. New York counted 197 galleries in 1965; in 1977, there were 2909. Young artists could be promoted faster in a new all-embracing communication system. When Julian Schnabel opened his first solo show at Mary Boone, all his paintings were sold out for 2,500 to 3,000 dollars. Two years later the same thing happened, but prices were at \$40,000. A middle-sized Jeff Koons cost around \$40,000 in 1987, in 1989 the price doubled, in 1990 you had to pay \$190,000. The auction houses, starting to sell contemporary art, contributed to the development. Incredible profit margins and new transparency – you could learn about the potential profits by reading the results of the auctions worldwide – attracted new audiences (Fig. 7).

In the aftermath, Hollein (1999, 37) observes a radically new position of art in society. Artists and collectors no longer were an encapsulated, sworn-in community, but suddenly stood at the center of post-industrial society. The reason for this was the economic growth due to neoliberal governments like the one of Margaret Thatcher (starting 1979) and Ronald Reagan (1980). "In the eighties", writes Hollein, "artists became fully aware of their role in the art-market system, taken in a more or less voluntary way. That was probably also the case earlier, but for the first time a generation of artists accepted these mechanisms of the market openly." (Hollein 1999, p.38; my translation) The market opened a stage to perform public personas; it became a medium of the work. When Koons was accused that his works were superficial, vulgar, and pandering, this was part of his artistic strategy.

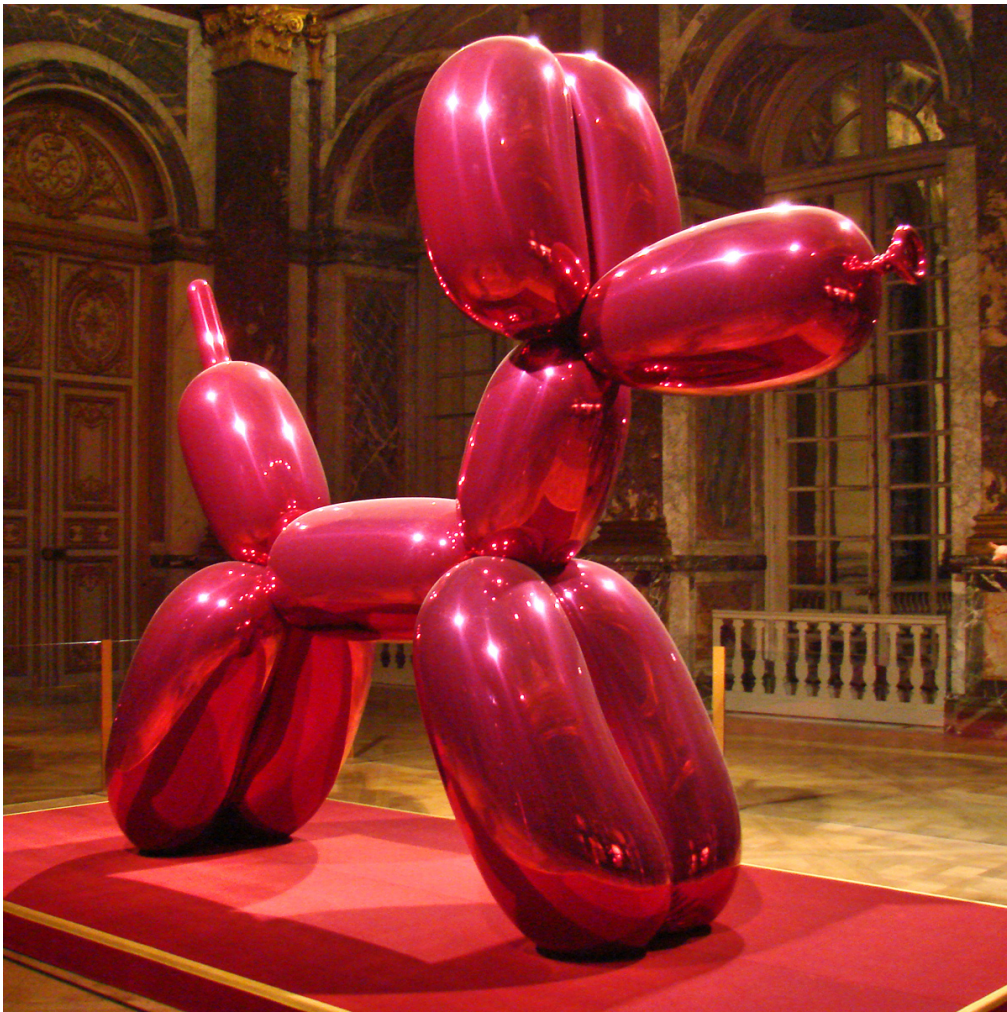


Figure 7: Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*. Photo by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra.  
Château de Versailles (Salon d'Hercule). October 25, 2008.  
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Here 'complicity' became a significant issue. In 1986 a group of artists met at Pat Hearn Gallery in New York to discuss a recent development: 'From Criticism to Complicity'. The talk at Pat Hearn Gallery is also interesting because only a few months later the theoretical premises of this discussion were already outdated. After 1987, because of a financial recession and rising political conflicts, the idea of subversion by complicity lost its attraction. Postmodernism came to an end. The keyword of the discussion was 'desire'. Desire was meant as a term to counter the rationality and the 'cleaning processes' of earlier forms of art. It was, however, the desire to consume. "There is a stronger sense of being complicit with the production of desire," confessed Haim Steinbach, "what we traditionally call beautiful, seductive objects, than being positioned somewhere outside of it." (Nagy, p. 149) The art object is now placed strategically into the larger scenario of political and social reality. It interacts in a significant way and these interactions are made visible. Halley refers to situationism when he calls this work a "situationist object" (ibid., p. 150). Halley feels as if he lives in a "post-political situation": Instead of obtaining a critical discourse of the social, the work should functionally make part of it, producing an "affirmative critique." The practice of these artists, usually called "Simulationists," appears to be a translation of the poststructuralist theory of the signifier. It is a resonance of Roland Barthes' idea of a second-order sign, a stolen language, that could only be deconstructed from inside. It refers to Jacques Derrida's concept of the circularity of language: Whoever wants to destroy metaphysics will get tangled up in it. Michel Foucault found political power inscribed into everyday practice. Power is always there, and you never can be outside of it. Consequently, artists developed a 'local' institutional critique that was performed inside the museum, inside the circulation of goods. As Barbara Kruger claimed: "One has to work within the confines of the system." (Hutcheon, 1989, p.140)

But it was Jean Baudrillard, his *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* published in 1981, who helped expand a practice, already used by the so-called Pictures Generation, to objects. Baudrillard (1981, 30) developed the idea of 'symbolic exchange value' as neither the older Marxist tools of 'use value' nor 'exchange value' would sufficiently describe the role of objects gained as signs in late capitalism. Baudrillard claims that the product has the same relational existence as the phoneme in linguistics. Its meaning is articulated in relation to other objects, by difference, in a hierarchical code of meanings. And these meanings help acquire status in society. Using ready-made objects in her works, the artist can deal with the sign value that these objects have in their social context. Creating new assemblages of objects equals deviant meanings. In the face of the growing art market, this type of strategic complicity proved to be hugely successful in financial terms, so that the critical impact that the artists claimed lost its credibility.

## Criticality

In 1987 you could find a strange installation in one of the New Museum windows on Broadway. A photograph of the Nuremberg trial was re-used. Also, the pink triangle on top of it was a quote, referring to the Nazi stigmatization of gay people. In neon letters it said: Silence = Death. Silhouetted photographs were added to the historical photo, of "AIDS Criminals": Senator Jesse Helms, the televangelist Jerry Farewell or the columnist William F. Buckley. The piece was produced by an artist-activist group called ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, founded in the same year. The artistic community in New York suffered terribly from the AIDS crisis. No artist who had no friends who died. Their death apparently was the result of price-gouging by the pharmaceutical industry, keeping drugs as expensive as possible. And it was the consequence of the neo-liberal politics of the government. The fight against AIDS created awareness for other political conflicts, motivating a return to the real and a critique of poststructuralist theory and its focus on signs and language. As Douglas Crimp (1987, 7) wrote at the time, art was not only a consumer object; it does have the power to save lives.

ACT UP became a model for an alternative understanding of artistic practice: Propelled by political necessity, artists ventured beyond the art world, directly reacting and intervening in ongoing political events. They escaped a conceptual framing that made the abstract structure of language a model to apprehend and organize art. To take position in political conflict changed the postmodernist claims concerning authorship, artwork, beholder. Shared activity was rated more powerful than the efforts of a single author, might he be a 'social construction' or not. The single voice appeared weaker in public debate.

The collective replaced the audience: While postmodernism still preached to a passive recipient, now what was a beholder became a teammate. Differences between author and activist disappeared. They were united by the sharing of political aims and political practice. And the work was not evaluated by social prestige or sign exchange value, but by efficiency. The change in political climate went together with a change in critical theory. 'Universal Abandon', a special issue of *Social Text*, allows a symptomatic view. All its contributors question the linguistic model. State repression, says Cornel West, cannot be understood through linguistic models. "Power operates very differently in non-discursive than in discursive ways." (Stephanson 1988, 271) And Chantal Mouffe attacks the thesis of the all-inclusive language – so essential for the appropriation strategies of postmodern artists – by making a difference between philosophical argument and political action.

Even if language appears to be an indispensable requirement that “does not mean that we cannot distinguish within a given regime of truth between those who respect the strategy of argumentation and its rules, and those who simply want to impose their power.” (Mouffe 1988, 38) The paradigmatic role that language structure had for postmodernism is destroyed. Practice cannot take its place, because practice is always embedded in the social and therefore opposes any generalization as a ‘paradigm’. In that sense Cornel West also criticizes ‘thick’ forms of political theory like ‘economic exploitation’ or ‘bureaucratic domination’, apparently reacting to AIDS activism and the situation of other marginalized groups in society. He asks for a ‘philosophy of practice’ that extends the political to all spheres, domains, and cultural practices. His emphasis lies on ‘practice’, articulating and embodying a philosophical attitude. Theory, says editor Andrew Ross, must leave the ‘high ground’ and get practically involved in the diversities of everyday life. The links of poststructuralist networks should be “articulated, or bound together, from contest to contest, and from moment to moment” says Ross. (Ross 1988, xiv) ACT UP and its political protest concerned the gay community and gave it visibility and a voice. The movement gained a paradigmatic quality, because it became clear that society was not built by specific social classes so much as by a patchwork of minorities, which had to fight for their rights. Feminism had laid much of the groundwork for this view of society, which introduced female identity as dependent on discourse and social construction. The concept that ‘woman’ is not a natural given subject but the result of the use of language games and habitual behavior, following political interests, as is the perception of other groups like people of color or migrants. This turn to a practical confrontation with the peculiarities of daily life calls to mind the new field called ‘cultural studies’, a critical offspring of postmodernism. Also, cultural studies perform an empirically engaged analysis, using – among other tools – anthropological methods.

Young artists would get to know these new approaches to a sound and interventionist practice for example at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Teachers here would be artists like Dan Graham or Martha Rosler, who knew the activism of the seventies. On their reading lists, they would not only find poststructuralists like Michel Foucault or Louis Althusser but also representatives of cultural studies like Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, or Edward Said. At the end of the postmodern paradigm, these students were trained to deal with micropolitics, giving voice to minorities. As Bordowitz (1989, p. 8) says in 1989: “What seems useful to me now is to go out and do work that is directly engaged, that is productive – to produce work that enables people to see what they are doing, that enables them to criticize what they are doing...”



## Author Biography

Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen is professor of art theory at Free University Bolzano, where he established the Major in Art. He also holds a honorary professorship for artistic knowledge at Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen. After studying philosophy, linguistics and communication design in Cologne, Konstanz, Wuppertal, Schmidt-Wulffen worked as an art critic in the Rhein area, closely related to the Cologne art scene. As director of the Kunstverein in Hamburg (1992-2000) he opened the stage for artists like Olafur Eliasson, Pierre Huyghe or Carsten Höller. He was the rector of the academy of fine arts Vienna (2002-2011), introducing one of the first practice-based PhD programs on the continent, and of the New Design University St.Pölten (2011-2016). [Stephan.SchmidtWulffen@unibz.it](mailto:Stephan.SchmidtWulffen@unibz.it)

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Christopher Mühlenberg

<sup>2</sup> The exhibited artists were: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Philip Smith. Helene Winer, director of Artists Space from 1975 until 1980, restricted exhibitions to artists not yet represented in galleries and exhibiting there only once (Pearlman, 2003, p. 38). Artists like David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Matt Mullican, or Thomas Lawson did not participate in 'Pictures' but counted to the same movement. (See: Lawson 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, 1977. See especially 'From Work to Text', *ibid.*, pp.155-164

<sup>4</sup> Judd's text 'Specific objects' is a resume of don'ts and do's: the sculpture is composed of parts and is, therefore, 'anthropomorphic'. The painting developed into a self-referential object lost its representative function and fraudulent illusionism but didn't even reach the status of sculpture. The 'specific object' came closest to being "completely objective, purely practical or merely present." Judd, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> History is a test of relevance: Today, the pupils and pupils of pupils of Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen testify their artistic significance. With Charline van Heyl, Jutta Koether, Cosima von Bonin we find a female translation of Kippenberger's machismo; Seth Price or Wade Guyton follow Oehlen's revitalized abstractions in the third generation.