

Title: The Evolution of the Reputation of Postmodernism

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Programme of Study: BA Illustration

Module: ADAD5003 Research in Context

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Word Count: 2322

Postmodernism refers to a late 20th century movement that satirically responds to societal and political ideals, outright opposing the dogma set in place by both the government and general public at the time of creation (Britannica, 2009). Due to its purposefully contrarian nature, this movement was especially viewed as contentious in the art world. This essay intends to explore the means in which *Postmodernism* has been viewed and adapted; this will be done by examining the works of various artists (Serrano, Manzoni, Emin, Banksy) that adopt the postmodern ideology and various critics (Stallabrass, Risatti, Spalding) of the contemporary period as a whole. This essay aims to compare and contrast these key writers and artists to explore how the landscape and reputation of *Postmodernism* has evolved since its debut.

The official beginning of the *Postmodernist* movement is highly contested, with multiple sources claiming different starting points. Stallabrass argues that *Postmodernism* began in the mid 1970s (Stallabrass, 2003) although this is challenged by Octavio Paz (n.d.,

cited in Risatti, 1990, p. 57), claiming that “the end of the idea of modern art” arose in the late 1960s. There is also a link to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Titan Missile Museum, 2020), with high art continuing to be challenged in retaliation to the Cold War (Stallabrass, 2003). Regardless of its origins, it is clear that the roots of *Postmodernism* are inherently political. For example, take into consideration Fig. 1:



Fig. 1: Andres Serrano (1987) *Immersion (Piss Christ)*

Fig. 1 portrays a statuette of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ submerged within the urine of artist Andres Serrano (Mortenson, 1999). While it is believed that the photograph was not intentionally offensive many Christians perceived it as such - this would incite criticism and facilitate a discussion around the portrayal of Christ in the present day (Monaco, 2000). This piece is a prime example of the *Postmodern* culture, due to its absurd nature that provokes a response from the casual viewer. This was not the first or

last of Serrano's religion themed *Postmodern* works, with his art piece *Blood Cross* (Fig. 2) being constructed just two years before this.



Fig. 2: Andres Serrano (1985) *Blood Cross*

Stallabrass puts forward the notion that *Postmodernism* seems to “exist in a zone of freedom, set apart from the mundane and functional character of everyday life, and from its rules and conventions” (Stallabrass, 2003, p. 1). In short, the intention of *Postmodernism* is simply ‘breaking the rules of art’.

Many authors are critical of *Postmodernism*, due to its tendency to live outside of the conventional means of ‘what makes art’. Spalding for example criticises its very core, claiming in a sense that *Postmodernism* is only appreciated for the attraction it garners (Spalding, 2003). While he is correct in the sense that these exhibitions thrive on controversy, it is safe for one to believe that he and other authors discussed may also be biased in their opinions of the movement. Howard Risatti poses the divide between *Modern* and *Postmodern* art as a war between the avant-garde and the profane (Risatti,

1990), which one can assume to be quite dramatic on his part. According to Risatti, classic pieces and the artists who created them are immortalised due to their historical relevance, as opposed to those that are simply “stylish” (p. 55). This clearly contradicts the *Postmodern* agenda, of which has the purpose to be contentious and provocative as discussed previously. Due to his strong belief that the avant-garde must “find a direction in a landscape into which no one seems to have yet ventured” (p. 56) , it would seem appropriate for one to take this as Risatti completely disregarding *Postmodern* works as unoriginal, with a lack of historical relevance.

While it is true that *Postmodern* installations may not take the time to capture history, it is also true that they capture societal tensions at the times of creation. Stallabrass for example perceives it as partly “a reaction against the market-friendly art of the 1980s which had been so suddenly beached and stranded by the recession” (Stallabrass, 2006, p. 13), citing movements such as feminism as talking points within the works created at the time. Art of the modern period had long been criticised for being purely for the advertiser-friendly, squeaky-clean image that purged originality almost completely. He also claims that *Postmodernism* “transcends rational understanding” (p. 6), which seems to perplex some previously discussed critics of the contemporary period. They may also be intimidated by the non-conventional mediums used, due to the shift from classic techniques such as painting to primarily installation art. Risatti seems to agree with this, writing that *Postmodern* art is “rooted in the deep-seated reactions against the process of *societal* modernization” (Risatti, 1990, p. 58), though his perception of the movement is predominantly negative as discussed previously. This is most likely due to the indiscriminately vulgar pieces that seemed to gather the most

attention within this period – such as Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 – although there are many more installations that appear to fit this description.



Fig. 3: Piero Manzoni (1961) *Artist's Shit*

Fig. 3 portrays a can of the artist Piero Manzoni's excrement labelled and put on display. Each can is labelled from zero to ninety-nine and specifically contains thirty grams (Tate, 2000). Spalding dedicates a portion of *The Eclipse of Art: Tackling the Crisis in Art Today* - his book tackling the aftereffects of what he perceived as a 'crisis of *Postmodernism*' - to discuss his dissatisfaction with Manzoni's work as a whole, reducing this work in particular to just "his [Manzoni's] own shit" (Spalding, 2003, p. 10) and criticising the Tate for their interest in the artist's work. However, this takes away

from the original thoughts and feelings of Manzoni and his true intentions, later put to paper in a letter written in December 1961:

I should like all artists to sell their fingerprints, or else stage competitions to see who can draw the longest line or sell their shit in tins. The fingerprint is the only sign of the personality that can be accepted: if collectors want something intimate, really personal to the artist, there's the artist's own shit, that is really his.
(Battino et al., 1991, p. 144)

This particular instance of Manzoni's work is believed to be tackling the fetishisation of the artist and the ways in which they sell their own bodies in order to make money. Due to the composition of the cans, one cannot even determine if they truly contain his feces, further adding to the message he was attempting to convey within his letter. In 1959, Manzoni released a series of tubes with drawn lines of several lengths (Fig. 4), relating to his discussion of 'who can draw the longest line'.



Fig 4: Pierro Manzoni (1959) *Linea 5m 70*, *Linea 10m 99*

This is also criticised by Spalding, using these examples specifically to make the claim that due to this new form of art gaining popularity that “art is not suffering from a swing of the pendulum, but is benighted by a total eclipse” (Spalding, 2003, p. 11). Risatti and Spalding specifically appear to have a massive distaste for the entirety of the *Postmodern* period, with the writings discussed overtly displaying this bias. Even installations considered to be less vulgar than the works already examined thus far have sparked controversy and deliberation into their true meanings from critics.



Fig. 5: Tracey Emin (1998) *My Bed*

Fig. 5 consists of Tracey Emin's unmade bed, surrounded by vodka bottles, newspaper, dirty clothes and other clutter. Submitted as a nominee for the 1999 Turner Prize

(Cohen, 2018), Emin made waves with her shockingly personal exhibition, describing it as the aftermath of her bad breakup of which she spent the days after in bed. Whilst some critics applauded her for her honesty within this installation, many chastised her for her brazen sexuality (Lesso, 2023). One of Emin's most vocal detractors was Adrian Searle, claiming the work was "an endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage to [Tracey]" (Gibbons, 1999) and calling Tracey a 'bore'. Alina Cohen however sees the piece differently, believing that it "elicits warmer, more personal responses" (Cohen, 2018) and allows for those who have experienced heartbreak to feel understood and touched by Emin's vulnerability. Emin's work has always drawn from her personal experiences of womanhood, touching upon her feelings of her life and translating them into artworks that expose her true nature (Artsper, 2022). It is clear that the hallmarks of Emin's work intersect with the fundamental values of the *Postmodernist* movement, making her a staple artist within the contemporary period. *My Bed* has been immortalised as a controversial yet expressive piece of installation art; while the piece still has its detractors, it has gained more respect and understanding in the present day due to its lasting impression on women globally.

Banksy is arguably the perfect example of *Postmodern* art and the current reputation of the *Postmodernism* movement. Famous for his stencilled graffiti paintings, the anonymous artist has been active since the early 1990s (Wright et al., 2007) and is best known for his political and often satirical artworks. His work has been critically acclaimed, with his most famous work *Girl with Balloon* (Fig. 6) touching hearts and minds as the UK's favourite artwork in 2017 (BBC News, 2017).



Fig. 6: Banksy (2002) *Girl with Balloon*

Banksy has used *Girl with Balloon* to spark outrage for several political causes, including a 2018 stunt in which after being sold at auction for \$1.4 million (roughly £1.1 million) he caused the artwork to self-destruct (Preuss, 2018). However, this may have backfired for him as the new piece – dubbed ‘*Love is in the Bin*’ - sold for a record breaking £16 million at auction, for a total of £18.5 million including a “buyer’s premium” (BBC News, 2021).



Fig. 7: Banksy (2018) *Love is in the Bin*

In a video created by Banksy (2018, cited in ANI, 2018) showing the construction of the shredder, the footage provided shows his intention for the painting to have been fully destroyed after the auction. It has been implied by Banksy that this stunt was in protest of his art being put to auction and to put out the message that 'art cannot be bought or sold', but some critics also believe that the image being half-shredded was completely intentional (Nanay, 2018) as a way to breathe new life into the contemporary period. In an article for Quartz, Bence Nanay simply says it "was nothing short of an emotional ode to the art markets".

Whilst Banksy is vastly popular in the art world, he has no shortage of critics that are quick to dismiss his work as simply surface level to pander to capitalism.

Banksy's satire makes an argument — but it doesn't deconstruct society and propose anything new. Through relying on easy satire, his focus on anonymity, and his lack of proposals for the future, Banksy fails to contribute anything but relatability to society. (Plizga, 2020)

Plizga's critique of Banksy's work covers how "dull and bland" it is, pointing out how he simply highlights the problem instead of providing any insightful commentary, seemingly hiding behind his anonymity as a means to not take on any responsibility as the figurehead for the *Postmodernist* movement. However, according to Banksy his anonymity is simply to avoid legal persecution due to his graffiti work being illegal (Hattenstone, 2003). Plizga's main critiques of Banksy's seem to root back to his unwillingness to reveal his true identity. While this is an understandable concern, it can be assumed to a point that there is frustration and some bias on Plizga's part. While it is true that an artist's personality can influence the tone and meaning of their work, it is not a required aspect in order for viewers to associate a meaning to their artworks. As discussed by Stallabrass, "Contemporary art seems to exist in a zone of freedom, set apart from the mundane and functional character of everyday life, and from its rules and conventions." (Stallabrass, 2003, p. 1). Viewers should be able to create their own interpretations of a piece of art, free from the confines of traditional art pieces that already have clear meaning due to the artist's own explanations.

This essay has explored the ways in which the landscape reputation of *Postmodernism* has evolved. *Postmodernism* has evolved to be more accepted by the public and critics alike, though this may also be due to the works that have been praised most shifting

back to less explicit and more family/advertiser-friendly and squeaky-clean as was described by Stallabrass in the modern era (Stallabrass, 2003). Banksy as a prime example appears to still be debated and adored by the public, though his critics believe he has become part of the capitalist agenda he seems to have claimed to be against. However, artists such as Tracey Emin have seemingly become more understood and congratulated for their work, as opposed to the ways they were lambasted in the past for seemingly being vulgar (Lesso, 2023). Comparing this to intentionally inflammatory works such as Fig. 1-4, Fig. 5 is much more appropriate for a general audience and is far removed from Spalding's criticisms. Due to Risatti's oppositions to the *Postmodern* movement being much less personal, he may still take issue with installations such as Fig. 5, due to the lack of historical and aesthetic value within them (Risatti, 1990).

While it wouldn't be appropriate to claim that the art viewed as most impactful by society has done a full three-hundred and sixty degrees, it could perhaps be fairer to say that it has followed an equilibrium of sorts. While Postmodern art doesn't quite seem to "transcend(s) rational understanding" (p. 6) as he describes anymore, it still does appear to "touch upon feminism, identity politics, mass culture, shopping and trauma" (p. 101) and various other aspects of daily life and societal issues that one may come to face.

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