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The Implication of Social Theory and Critical Theory
on the Designation of Objects as Works of Art

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Social theory and critical theory have substantially impacted the idea of what types of objects, including documentary photographs, are considered to be works of art. Social theory represents a broad field of objective intellectual inquiry about human society, while critical theory seeks to move beyond inquiry to action on behalf of social justice. Because these theories can potentially cover a nearly infinite number of topics and academic disciplines, this paper will be confined to the ways in which social theory, the Frankfurt School, neo-Marxism, feminism, critical race theory, and postcolonial criticism relate to art.

Part I

Social theory in art examines the practice and objects of art within society, but refrains from making judgments of aesthetic value. Austin Harrington, in *Art and Social Theory: Sociological Arguments in Aesthetics* (2004) states:

Social theory refers valuations of works of art to social facts about different changing contexts of social institutions, social conventions, social perception, and social power... Social theory cannot itself generate aesthetic judgments about works of art. Social theory can analyze and interpret value but it cannot itself ground value. (p. 4)

In contrast, critical theory examines diverse types of knowledge as historically and culturally contingent and seeks to identify and solve social problems (Cary, 1998, p. 12). The goal of critical theory is to expose embedded social mechanisms of inequality or injustice by identifying and eliminating underlying assumptions, biases, prejudices, or preconceptions. Critical theory originated with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, a group of scholars who sought to improve the understanding of society through the integration of social sciences, using Marxist concepts to analyze social relations within capitalist economies and industrialized societies. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School and neo-Marxism, “espouses identifying and creating an awareness of the roots of inequality and marginalization, forming and enunciating critiques of the resultant social problems, and actively engaging in resistance” (Cary, p. 12). This is an activist standpoint as opposed to one of theoretical reflection.

Neo-Marxism maintains that:

...art and other cultural forms may indeed take on ideological functions, especially in a capitalist society. Further, the assignment of ideological functions often proceeds tacitly. The purpose of incorporating ideological functions in an art form is to maintain the status quo a socio-political-economic hierarchy prefers by covertly manipulating or suppressing critical awareness among the people. (Cary, p. 44, 45)

This theory springs from a deep mistrust of mass media and its promotion of consumerism, along with the media's tendency to suppress critical consciousness and to encourage conformity and passivity. It attempts to contradict the Enlightenment concept of the artist as a solitary individual possessing a unique gift of creativity, tying the production of art to economic structures, material production, and class structures. The Frankfurt School's Marxist concepts of art were originally promoted by thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin during the early to mid-twentieth century, and this thinking later resurfaced in the neo-Marxist writings of John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972) and Fredric Jameson (1984), continuing to the present day in the writings of theorists such as Jürgen Habermas (Harrington, 2004, p. 17; Bohman, 2005).

Feminist criticism of art, a subset of critical theory, takes two approaches: the historical objectification of women in works of art, and the role of women artists as active producers of works of art. Women have historically been represented in works of art as "objects of a male gaze, as objects of spectacle and curiosity, or as symbols of male material wealth and social prestige" (Harrington, 2004, p. 45), typically centering on the female subject's physical appearance and demeanor. Analysis of such works of art can serve as a means of investigation into historical and societal conditions and attitudes toward women, especially as evolving social attitudes are revealed in changing depictions of women throughout history (Harrington, p. 45).

Feminist criticism challenges the traditional model of artistic development as a linear progression from one white western male artist to another, questioning why women have not been included in the canon of great artists, and also exploring the ways in which women have actually, although heretofore invisibly, taken part in art production throughout history (Guerilla Girls, 1998). Critical feminist art theory interrogates the traditional formulation of male-dominated painting and sculpture as "art," while activities such as manuscript illustration or textiles, areas of creative production historically open to women, are denigrated as mere craft or decoration. "Feminist critics have argued that...art history should radically revise the vocabulary in which analysis and evaluation is carried out," an approach that should highlight "hitherto occluded dimensions of creative agency for women in the production of culture—beyond traditional conceptions of the boundaries of 'art'" (Harrington, 2004, p. 48, 49).

Critical race theory is another subset of critical theory which strives to advance social justice and to examine how race and racism operate within society, emerging in the 1990s through the work of African-American, Latino, and Asian-American legal scholars, particularly Derrick Bell (Collins, 2007). Critical race theory addresses the complex social issue of racism, pointing out that although the Civil

Rights Movement established laws that changed the legal character of racism, it did not succeed in completely changing society. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state, "...our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrong" (p. 26), including the indifference or coldness of whites toward people of color, or the attitude of white privilege that continues to pervade American society. Art can prove to be an effective tool for analyzing issues of race congruent with critical race theory. For instance, a study of the portrayal of African-Americans in Hollywood movies from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Roots* (1977) to *Rosewood* and *Amistad* (1997) can reveal shifting popular attitudes toward race and racism (Guthman, 1999). Moreover, as with feminism, the application of critical race theory to works of art can not only reveal racist social attitudes but can also provide an avenue for social justice as artists of color are accorded long-overdue recognition for their cultural achievements.

Postcolonial criticism is related to both feminism and critical race theory and can be seen in the work of theorists such as Sandoval, who states that "the methodology of the oppressed" is a means of "decolonizing the imagination" (2000, p.69). Similar to feminist criticism, postcolonial issues in art may be approached from two angles—that of western representations of colonized cultures, and of the artistic agency of such groups. Visual imagery of postcolonial cultures in western art is often indicative of "the other," showing members of non-western societies as primitive, brutish, cunning, threatening, or overly-sentimentalized "noble savages." Members of other races are typically peripheral to the central action of the image, consigned to the role of nomads or enemies. The appearance of colonized people in western art can be understood according to what Sandoval, citing Roland Barthes, would identify as "exoticism," or the transformation of "the other" into a spectacle, an entertainer, or the object of polite (or even voyeuristic) interest (Sandoval, p. 122).

In terms of artistic agency, modern western society turns the "life practices, belief-systems, and structures of vision of past historical worlds into objects of curiosity" (Harrington, 2004, p. 51), but postcolonial criticism emphasizes the need for colonized cultures to be understood on their own terms. Religious artifacts, for example, must not only be the subject of anthropological inquiry, but treated with dignity as having significant religious value for members of their culture of origin as well. Western societies have a long history of pillaging the sacred sites of colonized peoples, appropriating indigenous items for display in museums or the private collections of the wealthy. This action artificially imposes western concepts of aesthetics on such items, a questionable practice at best. The artistic agency of postcolonial people raises questions about aesthetic universality, or conversely, whether aesthetic criteria are best understood as being culturally specific (Harrington, 2004, p 52).

Part II

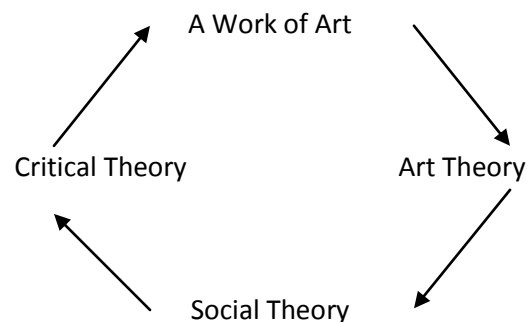
Critical theories of race, class, gender, and ethnicity all have implications for social theory as it relates to art, pointing to the dissolution of previous concepts of western art history as the logical progression from one white, western, male genius to the next. As more voices are added to art history, the idea of art itself becomes more complex, rich, and diverse, allowing for the inclusion of varieties of artistic expression that were previously rejected from the narrow circle of “fine art.” The entire sociological history of western art production is far beyond the scope of this paper, but briefly, the idea of “fine art” originated during the Enlightenment in the writing of Charles Batteux, who argued that painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and dance all shared the common property of the imitation of nature. Later philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel led to the notion that the “fine arts” were capable of communicating metaphysical truths, and must be appreciated as “art for art’s sake” (Harrington, 2004; Carroll, 2009). This resulted in the persistent view that painting and sculpture were superior to other forms of visual art media such as ceramics, textiles, glass, or metals, which frequently have practical purposes as well as solely being objects of visual appreciation. In many universities today this distinction can still be seen. As just one example, the University of Illinois School of Art and Design divides studio art majors into “fine” and “applied” categories. Under these two descriptors, metals and ceramics are further delimited under the designation of “craft” and graphic design, industrial design, new media, and photography are distinct from the fields of painting and sculpture (University of Illinois School of Art & Design website, 2009).

In Artworld settings such as museums and galleries, the advent of postmodernism has fragmented or transformed previous art concepts, leading the idea of the work of art away from its Enlightenment origins. Perhaps the most influential figure in the contemporary understanding of art is Marcel Duchamp, who presented manufactured objects such as a bottle rack, a comb, or most famously, a urinal (*Fountain*, 1917) as works of art, challenging longstanding beliefs about aesthetics and representation (Richter, 1978). Duchamp’s action took the importance away from the object and made the *idea* into a mechanism by which an object becomes art. All of conceptual art is based on this revolutionary notion. For instance, Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) is a blank piece of paper that was formerly an actual drawing by De Kooning (Kotz, 2004).¹ As with Duchamp, the idea becomes the art, not the object itself.

¹ An excellent video clip featuring Rauschenberg discussing this work is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCWh3IFtDQ>

Sociologist Howard Becker (*Art Worlds*, 1983, in Harrington, 2004, p. 29) and philosophers Arthur Danto (*The Artworld*, 1964) and George Dickie (*The New Institutional Theory of Art*, 1983) (both also in Harrington, p. 28, 29), concluded that an object's designation as a work of art is a function of the social institution of the Artworld; thus a urinal can be an artwork in a gallery, but a plumbing fixture when installed in a bathroom. Becker points to the work of art as existing among an established network of cooperative social links: "...art is less a history of outstanding creations by visionary individuals than a social configuration of practices guided by social conventions" (Harrington, 2004, p. 29, 30). Danto (1964) argues that a *theory* of art, rather than any visually perceptible quality of the work itself, determines the designation of an object as art, noting that this shift in ideology led to the placement of artifacts such as tapestries, ceremonial masks, or weaponry alongside paintings and sculptures in traditional fine art museums, further broadening the concept of "art" and removing it from its exclusionary Enlightenment definition.

Art making, art theory, social theory, and critical theory can sometimes be seen to form a circular progression (although many other paths are certainly possible). First, *a work of art* is created that deviates from an established social or artistic norm. Second, *art theory* examines it and responds by formulating new theory in order to accommodate the object, leading to the expansion of the idea of a work of art. Third, an expanded idea of art results in correspondingly expanded *social theory*. Fourth, expanded social theory may develop into *critical theory* promoting social activism related to the new theory, inspiring the creation of new works of art in order to examine, attack, or communicate issues of social justice. These *new works of art* may then transgress boundaries about what an acceptable work of art might be, thus renewing the cycle.



There are a virtually unlimited number of artists whose work exemplifies the influence of critical theory, feminism, critical race theory and postcolonialism on art, but in order to narrow the range of possibilities, this discussion will feature one mode of artistic production—photography—and select one artist from each of the three categories of feminism, critical race theory, and postcolonialism.



Cindy Sherman (1978). *Untitled Film Still #14*. Metro Picture Gallery.

Although she is not a documentary photographer, Cindy Sherman provides a clear example of the ways in which the critical theory of feminism has expanded the idea of art. Sherman's photographs are frequently interpreted as a deconstruction of the notion of photography as the vehicle of the male gaze: simultaneously the object and agent, Sherman appears before the lens as well as peering through it. *Untitled Film Stills* is perhaps her best known body of work: Sherman assumes many roles, constructing alternative identities in a sequence of fictitious publicity shots for imaginary films, playing with issues of identity, the role of women in society, and sexuality in these photographs, as well in other works in which she self-consciously replicates famous historical paintings of women (Galassi, 2003).



Gordon Parks (1942). *American Gothic*. Photographs division, Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information photography collection.

African-American documentary photographer Gordon Parks serves as an example of the ways in which critical race theory has influenced the idea of art. Parks was a photographer with the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s and 1940s, he was the first African-American photographer to work as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine, and he was also the first African-American artist to produce and direct a Hollywood film, (*The Leaning Tree*, 1969). Donald Faulkner, director of the New York State Writers Institute said, “Gordon Parks was like the Jackie Robinson of film...he broke ground for a lot of people—Spike Lee, John Singleton,” (Grundberg, 2006). Parks tells of his realization of the power of photographs when he first saw FSA imagery in a magazine: “I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs...I knew at that point I had to have a camera” (Grundberg, 2006).



Fazal Sheikh (1998). *Afghan Children Born in Exile*. Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland.

Documentary photographer Fazal Sheikh's art practice exemplifies postcolonial social and critical theory, revealing the faces of poor, dispossessed, and marginalized people in third-world countries in order to inspire social activism, rather than presenting them as the object of curiosity or exoticism. Sheikh's drive to promote social justice through his photographs grew from his father's Kenyan origins and his grandfather's displacement from his birthplace in a part of northern India that is now Pakistan, although Sheikh himself was born in New York City and educated at Princeton (Fallis, n.d.). Like Sheikh's other photographs, the image above is exquisitely rendered. He treats every subject with dignity, and attempts to portray people's stories through the evidence these experiences leave on their faces. In many cases he also records these stories and presents their narratives alongside the photographs in his books. Sheikh has won numerous international awards and fellowships for his transformative photographs, furthering his goal of increasing public awareness and activism on behalf of those most in need.

These photographers serve as evidence of the breaking of barriers of class, race, and gender, both in the agency of the artist and in the portrayal of women, non-whites, and non-westerners in works of art. The loosening of these categories broadens the definition of visual art from the "stale, pale, male, Yale" (Guerilla Girls, 1998, p. 7) view prevalent throughout most of art history. Moreover, the

genre of documentary photography as seen in the work of Parks and Sheikh specifically embodies both social and critical theory. According to William Stott (1986), a documentary photograph is a social document, and more specifically a human document, capable of placing a human face on a social problem, rendering a general social condition (social theory) specific and deeply personal, and thus conveying a powerful message of social criticism or the necessity for social justice (critical theory). Under a “fine arts” mindset, the terms “documentary” and “art” have been seen as an exclusionary binary pair, in which works in one category are automatically disallowed from the other. Documentary photographs, or so the thinking goes, cannot be “art” because their primary purpose is the conveyance of visual information rather than existing as “art for art’s sake.” Sandoval’s “differential” theory is useful in this case, demonstrating how ideas can exist in the “third space” between such binaries (2000, p. 145). The works of Parks, Sheikh, and other documentary photographers exemplify this type of duality, existing as both social documents and works of art, communicating specific factual information while also existing as subjects of aesthetic appreciation.

Harrington’s examination of social theory and art, the advancement of social and critical theory surrounding race, class, and gender, the art historical/philosophical progression from Enlightenment designations of art to the modes of art production occurring in postmodernism, all open the idea of the work of art to a now unlimited range of possibility. It no longer makes sense to include or exclude any object, including documentary photographs, as a works of art solely on the basis of who created the object, what subject is depicted, or the object’s mode of artistic production.

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