European and American Art 1970 - 2015: Gerald Deslandes ©

The last three decades of the twentieth century were a time of considerable political upheaval. The aftermath of the oil crisis, the Vietnam War and Watergate shook many people's belief in the superiority of the west. At the same time the fall of the Berlin Wall and the events in Tiananmen Square ushered in a new era in the former Soviet Union and China, which was soon to be followed by the rise of new economic powers in Asia, South America and the Middle East. The west lurched from a manufacturing to a service economy in which financial products were paramount. Digitisation and the development of the internet accelerated these changes. As fewer people stayed in the same job, the same place or even the same relationship, notions of class and identity became more fluid. The fear of AIDS was followed by an anxiety about the environment. The faith in scientific, material and egalitarian progress that had fuelled the Modernist movement rapidly diminished. This was mirrored by a decline in the perception of avant garde art as an agent of benign political change.

By 1970 many artists had explored the diminishing importance of their individual fine art practice within the context of a mass culture that was saturated by consumerism and the proliferation of mechanically produced images. Warhol created *The Factory* as a studio in which his assistants transformed celebrity sitters into identical portraits. In the same way, minimalist artists, like Carl Andre, used simple geometric shapes, industrial materials or pre-determined approaches to making works to reduce the sense of personal handicraft. The search for alternatives to the art market inspired works as various as performance art, gallery installations and Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*.

In England a preoccupation with Britain's changing social identity and the decline of manufacturing in the west can be found in Tony Cragg's recycling of discarded plastic, Bill Woodrow's map of the former British empire or John Kippin's photograph *Nostalgia for the Future*.

Modernism was also being challenged by the emergence of new voices. Marina Abramovic and Valle Export used their own bodies to confront male attitudes. Cindy Sherman arranged to be photographed in a range of cinematic roles that exposed the nature of female stereotyping. Mary Kelly documented her experience of pregnancy and child-rearing. In the same way Judy Chicago celebrated 999 forgotten women from history while Jenny Holzer used moving message boards in ways that recalled Guy Debord's ideas about *'the society of the spectacle'* and Baudrillard's description of the artificiality of contemporary experience as *'a network of ever-changing signs'*.

Non-western artists and those from non-European backgrounds contributed to the preoccupation with image and identity. Some used photography, architecture, quilting and ceramics to challenge the traditional hegemony of painting and sculpture. Others such as Anselm Kiefer represented the anti-Semitist history of the newly reunified Germany through the contrast between the stereotype of a blonde German girl and a dark Jewish girl. Korean artist Nam June Paik exhibited TVs with statues of the Buddha or Asian TV shows based on American models to suggest the Babel of an increasingly globalised culture. Bruce Nauman coached a white woman and a young black man to recite the same script with different emphases to show how meaning differs according to the context and the communicator. Elsewhere Gillian Wearing encouraged adults to recite their childhood traumas behind masks with their voices distorted to resemble those of young children.

The destruction of the World Trade Centre and the beginning of the so-called 'war on terror' introduced an even darker narrative. With the coming of the new millennium, many artists continued to explore their cultural histories. For example, Ai Wei Wei smashed an antique Chinese vase to raise awareness of the much more serious iconoclasm that had taken place during the Cultural Revolution. Albanian video-maker Anri Sala worked with lip-readers to decipher a lost sound track of a 1970s film of his mother speaking in support of Enver Hoxha. He then exhibited it with an interview in which she denied that she had had any sympathy for the previous Communist regime.

The opening of new museums, changes in education and broadcasting and opportunities for international travel created a greater appreciation of the visual arts. Yet the emergence of digitisation and of new technology led some artists to use irony and appropriation in order to question the authenticity of images and of the sincerity of those that used them. Gerhard Richter produced abstract paintings in which he faked the spontaneity of the American Expressionists through photographing and reproducing small areas of brushwork in his own paintings. Jeff Koons referenced Duchamp's ready-mades by presenting hoovers and basketballs as his own work. The blurring of distinctions between the artist's work, the mass-produced and the multiple had important implications for photography. Sherrie Levine re-photographed works by Edward Weston while Andreas Gursky used digital techniques to render his photographs as deliberately opaque as the stock exchanges and trading floors that he was seeking to represent.

Since the new millennium artists have continued to focus on the notion of value and on the art world itself. Damien Hirst created *For the Love of God,* in which he turned a skull studded with £24m of diamonds into a £50m art work. Santiago Sierra tattooed a line across the backs of four addicted sex workers in exchange for a shot of heroin. However, the use of irony and appropriation has given way to more complex narratives that pose questions about the nature of the art and its relationship with its audience. For example, Cao Fei created *RMB City,* a collaborative venture similar to *SimCity* across a range of platforms including social media to investigate the boundaries between real and virtual identities. In the same way Ai Wei Wei submitted an art work to an exhibition in Kassel that consisted of his using the commission fee that he had received from the organisers to enable a group of Chinese people to attend the show.

Some key quotes are shown below:

 'In societies in which modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as a vast accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' Guy Debord: Society of the Spectacle 1977

*'the new art represents a transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society; from a society of expanding markets to one of stagnant growth in which wealth is more redistributed than created; from a culture in which production, innovation and individualism are mythologised in the name of creativity to a society that stresses the manipulation of what already exists, be it capital or cultural signs. -'*Peter Halley: Nature and Culture 1983

'*Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games.'* - Jean-Francois Lyotard: *What is Postmodernism?* 1982: