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Deconstruction, Abjection, and Meaning in Contemporary Art

World Trends and the BYU Museum of Art

Kirsti Ringer

Visit any contemporary art exhibition in the world. You might be shocked, but it is unlikely that you will be surprised. You will probably see something huge and imposing—in fact, almost everything will be BIG. There will be appropriated pop culture images and graffiti, found objects in installation, photographs of the artist (probably in serial), and definitely electronics—video and neon and interactive computerish things. Perhaps there will be some naked people (and if there are, they will probably be posted all over the city as exhibition advertisements). There will be large-scale photographic social commentary, and, inevitably, there will be a retrospective of an important late-nineteenth- or twentieth-century artist—Warhol or Picasso or Jasper Johns. The museum shop will also be featured prominently, usually at the main entrance. What you will rarely find is a thorough discussion of what is being presented. This is part of the unique phenomenon of contemporary art. The art *and* the presentation of the art have merged into a murky space that resists clarity of explanation and understanding. The reason for this lack is tied to the very ideas behind contemporary art, but as the role of a museum is to clarify and educate, it is even more crucial that museums and galleries carefully present contemporary art in a way that interrogates and carefully examines what is being produced.

When I took my first art history class at BYU in the early 1980s, I was a little perplexed to see that the art covered in the textbook only reached until about 1970. I wanted to know what had happened in the last ten years. What is even more distressing now, in 2014, is that nothing has really changed much. Most textbooks still culminate with a nice

discussion of minimalism and post-minimalist movements and then give a very short, somewhat random smattering of artists and movements from the 1980s through the present. Even books specifically on contemporary art offer only a catalog of important artists and various individual ideologies, but no overarching principle that elucidates the art scene of the past thirty years. From this it would seem that there is no defining movement of our current era—that it is indeed just a smattering of individual artists and ideas. It is post-post-postmodern. Anything goes. It is impossible to define. And yet there *are* similarities. When one goes to a contemporary art museum, there is continuity—a unifying principle. But what, exactly, is it?

A few years ago in a faculty seminar on modernism, I had a small epiphany: perhaps in order to understand modernism and beyond, we have to change our approach. Art and religion and science and all elevated human thought are not only defined by *what* the answers are in a certain period, but by *where* people look for meaning. In other words, and overly simplified, *what* the Egyptians and the Greeks and the early Christians believed was very different, but *where* they looked for answers was similar and was the defining feature of the ancient world. These disparate cultures had vastly different beliefs, but they shared the idea that meaning comes from or exists in a perfect universe, outside of this world. Art reflected the view of the universe as the seat of meaning. Its emphasis was on gods and kings, with big ideas and monumental structures being devoted to them. Art was the abstracted and highly perfected forms that echoed the perfect nature of the universe. The artists were almost universally unknown during the ancient and medieval period because they were unimportant in comparison to the truth that exists beyond this world.

Modernism formed along with Renaissance humanism, which, although it still acknowledged the perfect universe, began to believe that the universe can only be understood by humans through the human mind—“I think, therefore I am.” Over the next centuries, modern thought and art shifts its emphasis away from trying to find meaning in the universe per se to finding meaning in the universe through the intellect of humankind and eventually to finding meaning in the mind of the individual. The individual artist or thinker becomes known and essential. Each consecutive movement during the period from the late fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century describes the mind as the arbiter of meaning. We know modern ideas by categories, beginning with large classifications such as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, then

through increasingly more specific and smaller groups such as impressionists or pre-Raphaelites or post-impressionists or symbolists.

At the turn of the twentieth century, there is another significant change in the perception of where it is appropriate or possible to look for meaning. The intellect itself becomes suspect, and the trajectory of meaning, through the influence of thinkers like Sigmund Freud, becomes suspect also. The mind can be ruled by subliminal choices of which the consciousness is not aware. Minds can be fooled by our sense perceptions. Indeed, perceptions and reasoning can be completely false. Therefore, the intellect cannot be trusted as fully as modern thinkers had supposed. Dada, surrealism, and other movements explore and question the adequacy and relevancy of attributing meaning to the mind. Since meaning can no longer be coupled to a universe of which we cannot be sensible, nor to a mind of which we cannot be confident, meaning can only be arbitrary and random.

Meaning is eventually saved, at least temporarily, by a branch of philosophy called phenomenology, espoused by Edmund Husserl and later Martin Heidegger, which locates meaning not only in the mind but in the relationship of the mind and the physical world. Phenomenology proposes that meaning exists somewhere between the isolated thoughts of individuals, their body's sensibilities, and the world in which they act and live. As these forces interact, being and meaning are created. Meaning could be described as experience. In art, this is shown by the movements such as expressionism, minimalism, performance art, environmental art, and installation art, each of which finds unique ways to push the idea of experience as the most important factor in making and seeing art. The mind of the artist and the art object take a backseat to the act of making art an experience. The artist's experience is coupled to the experience of the observer encountering art. Like meaning, art begins to reside in the space between the experiences of the artist and the world.

If we are looking for art only in the "acceptable" places where meaning resides in any given moment, then the next shift in the perceived location of meaning explains what is happening in contemporary art. I propose that this shift has to do with the idea of deconstruction both in the production as well as in the presentation of art in galleries and museums around the world—in other words, in the kind of art that is produced and the kind of exhibitions that have a common theme, despite the many disparate individual manifestations. I will also discuss how this particular manifestation has a flaw of circular reasoning that impedes its careful examination, but how that examination must, or at least *can* and ought to, take place.

Rather than finding meaning in a greater universe, or in the rational mind, or even in the phenomenological space that exists between the universe and the self, contemporary thought relies on the idea of deconstruction. Briefly, deconstruction maintains that in order to understand anything, you must look at its smallest parts. In society at large, this has had great value. We break down the world around us into its fundamental origins, causing increased scientific understanding of chemistry, biology, environments, technology, evolution, and so forth. By understanding the origins of life and substance, we gain a better understanding overall.

When this is applied to thought, language, and art, it has a more complex result than in the sciences. It has led to a destruction of the idea of meaning or at least of the possibility of communicating. When we break down our former methods of finding meaning—experience, thought, and language—into their smallest parts, we find that there is a huge gulf between those experiences, thoughts and language on one side and meaning on the other. If we address deconstruction in language, or semiotics, we find that the sign (the word) and the signified (the object or idea indexed by the sign) have no absolute relation, only a vague correlation—and sometimes not even that. Because of the imperfection of symbolic thought and words in our own consciousness, we are not even able to communicate meaningfully with ourselves. French philosopher Jacques Derrida has characterized the ultimate end of this trajectory by the statement “there can be no successful speech act.”¹ This is especially relevant to us as humans because through our acquisition of language, even thought is essentially a speech act. This is not to say that there is no meaning, but simply that if there is meaning, it is not communicable, even to ourselves to the extent that we use language in our thoughts. Therefore, if there is meaning anywhere, it must be pre-language. The philosopher John Searle of Berkeley relates a story of a conversation he had with a student of Derrida. The student had made the statement that there could be no successful speech act. Searle replied something like, “If I’m hungry and go to McDonalds and order a Big Mac and they give me one and I eat it—that seems like a successful speech act to me.” The student was flustered and took the question back to Derrida. Derrida responded in a letter something to the effect of, “It was not a successful speech act because

1. This is an oft-repeated idea of Derrida. One place it can be found is: <http://easyurltoremember.com/docs/papers/quineandderrida.pdf>.

what you really wanted was your mother's milk."² This story is significant to us for two reasons: First, it demonstrates the deconstructionist gulf that exists between meaning and language (you do not—cannot—know what you are really asking for because you use language), and second, it places meaning in the more trustworthy, pre-language, physical state (your real desire is the pre-language desire for all sorts of primal comfort and satiation as described by Derrida). Art can also be described in these same terms of semiotics because it is "visual language." But it is a unique language that shares both the symbolic nature of oral and written language with an experiential pre-language language—sensation, sight, sounds, and so forth. As such, this particular exploration of deconstruction has been ubiquitously adopted by the contemporary art world. In general, art of the contemporary world has been "conceptual art." This is art that questions itself and the language that it uses. In conceptual art, ideas are explored, isolated, and broken down and the execution becomes a perfunctory, imperfect reflection of the idea. As with language, it is in the pre-language experience that the meaning (if any) resides.

The most direct manifestation of deconstruction in contemporary art is the specific quality known as "abjection." In abjection, those basic bodily functions that are normally disregarded are brought to the forefront for inspection. For example, let's say I give you a piece of really good chocolate to eat. After a few seconds, I might begin to deconstruct the experience for you. I might describe how your tongue is smashing it against the roof of your mouth in order to taste it, how your glands are beginning to secrete saliva and your teeth are masticating the chocolate to begin the digestion process and how finally, your throat contracts as you swallow the mixture of chocolate and saliva. What if I then ask you to spit in your hand and look at the spit, maybe stick another finger in it and roll it around as the chocolaty spit becomes cold? This is how abjection is understood in art—deconstructing experience to its extreme physical parts and presenting it for examination. Beginning in the late sixties, abjection as it relates to deconstruction as the latest seat of meaning became a predominant subject in art. We saw lots of body fluid art—where the site of art in many cases became excrement, blood, and the body itself.

2. This is an anecdotal story told by a former student of John Searle. I emailed Searle in 2011 to check on the veracity of the story since I was using it as an example. In August 2011, he replied that the first part of the story was true, but that he did not remember Derrida's response, although it was "true."

There are countless specimens of abjection in the past forty years. Vito Acconci's *Trademarks*, Kiki Smith's *Body Fluids*, Marc Quinn's *Blood Head*, and Janine Antoni's *Mortar and Pestle* are all examples of how aspects of the body are presented for consideration on a pre-language level. Many people complain that this kind of art is objectionable and meant only to shock. This may be the intent. However, in the context of the larger philosophical conversation where intent is only marginally relevant, this art is clearly understandable as the logical embodiment of deconstruction in art.

The idea of abjection has been adequately acknowledged and discussed in art theory, but there has not been a sufficient understanding of where this idea has come from. In general, art historians as well as artists talk about art in a Hegelian way—artists reflect the trends and development of their culture—but for some reason, although abjection has dominated the contemporary art world for the last forty years, there seems to be little perception of where this artistic impulse has come from and what it means. Many artists who portray abjection have never heard of Derrida, nor could they adequately define deconstruction, let alone abjection. But this lack doesn't really matter. Deconstruction is the prevailing sentiment of our time with regard to meaning. I highlight Derrida because while Derrida is only one articulator among many who lack confidence in the possibility for meaning, his particular articulation fits so perfectly to what is happening in the art world today. Like the disparate cultures of the ancient and medieval world, they are still knit together, at least loosely, by a common contemporary theme—that meaning, if it exists at all, is most likely to be found in things otherwise thought of as meaningless, namely pre-language functions. Art is a language that is uniquely positioned to create a pre-language experience.

If we accept the idea of abjection as still being a dominant manifestation of meaning in the last few decades, then the motivation for a closely related trend in art also becomes clear. There is another side to that coin of object fascination with the body, and that flip side is the combination of abjection with beauty. Recently, there has been an increase in these super-beautiful, flawless, overtly sexual, and ageless bodies as the subject of art. It is really just another kind of abjection, but it is more palatable and has been easily and fully adopted by contemporary art and popular culture. Will Cotton, for example, is famous for his completely vacuous, physical, colorful pre-language depictions. This isolation of beauty is analogous to the relationship of the spit in your hand to the chocolate you just enjoyed. It is real, but it is so deconstructed as to remove it from any meaning other than pre-language physicality.

There are several other specific ways in which the flipside to abjection has become predominant in contemporary art; cute art and technological art are perhaps the two most prevalent and important trends. Mark Ryden's cutesy animals, Takashi Murakami's anime, the oversized Hello Kittys at the Museum of Modern Art, and Jeff Koons's enormous balloon dogs and topiary puppies are examples of a trend in frivolity in art that smacks of deconstruction. The power in these images is nothing more than a pre-language reaction that, like the other kind of abjection, defies any deeper meaning. Another example is the trend in technological and kinetic art that elicits a similar reaction from the viewer. We are wowed by the kinetic sculptures of Theo Jansen³ or the light experiences of Carlos Ruiz-Diaz,⁴ but they are mostly just "wow." If there is a deeper meaning at the core of these works, it usually has to do with alienation and fragmentation of the modern world caused by technology—another type of deconstruction. In some ways, technological art is the perfect vehicle for the idea of deconstruction in art because ultimately technology is a human invention that can be so meaningless and alienating. Technological art often contributes to the idea that we are just computers made of meat. In each case, the power of the art comes from its pre-language appeal, and the possibility for meaning in art has effectively followed the discussion of meaning in language.

This explains another dominant and very current trend that is a combination of the two sides of abjection. It is everywhere. Many leading contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, Matthew Barney, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Paul McCarthy, Cathy Wilkes, Ai Wei Wei, Tonia Bruegera, and Andrea Fraser use incredibly beautiful people in incredibly beautiful works of art doing incredibly abject things. The beauty is as abject as the abjection. Takashi Murakami takes those same harmless, frivolous figures and adds elements of abjection, such as in *My Lonesome Cowboy* in which an anime figurine engages in patently obscene behavior, or in *Hiropon* whose character is equally obscenely engaged.⁵ Ryden juxtaposes images painted in his saccharine style like bunnies and little girls with the butchering of meat. Other artists such as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage use Bougreau-like virtuoso painting

3. Theo Jansen, *Strandbeest*, 2007, <http://www.strandbeest.com/>.

4. Carlos Cruz-Diez, *The Embodied Experience of Color*, 2010, <http://artdistricts.com/cruz-diez-interactive-at-mam/>.

5. Incidentally, Takashi Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1997, sold for \$15.1 million.

to portray enormously breasted women in art that anywhere outside a gallery would simply be called pornography. Jennie Saville uses her lush, rich, gorgeous painting skill to portray eviscerated, beaten, slaughtered women. Matthew Barney in his *Cremaster Cycle* video art uses his own beautiful body fused with silliness, senseless violence, blood, and dismemberment. Damien Hirst's approach is a sterile combination of violence, death, beauty, and wealth that denudes any of these usually powerful references of meaning. Tracey Emin uses the image of her own empty existence that hovers between glamor and degradation as a means of deconstructing life to the point where the possibility of meaning is extremely suspect. The list goes on and on and reads like the Turner Prize winners over the past thirty years.⁶ The art is varied, but the sense is the same. This is the condition of the contemporary art world. It is a manifestation of the understanding of meaning in our times.

Herein lies the problem. Instead of being examined carefully, this juxtaposition of the super-beautiful and the super-bject is merely perpetuated by the institutions and museums that present art to the public. Like an awe-inspiring Anish Kapoor sculpture that cannot be ignored, museums promote slick "blockbuster" shows that emphasize the immediate physical, visceral reaction to art designed to evoke the "wow" moment first and foremost. There is nothing wrong with that, necessarily, but the experience often ends there. I recently visited the Nelson-Atkins Gallery, which is a delightful, small museum in Kansas City. It had advertised a once-in-a-lifetime Monet exhibit, which turned out to be just one painting. It was a very nice, very large water lilies installation, but nevertheless, there was a lot of build-up for one painting. The Nelson-Atkins Gallery website prominently featured interactive pages where I could play around on the site and connect to social media, and I could easily find upcoming events and where to shop. Current exhibitions were obscured, and I could not find the archive of past exhibitions or any commentary on them. This is just one example of trends that contribute to a superficial experience and lack of content beyond the initial attraction. It shows a distrust of the audience that accompanies a distrust of the art itself to do more than create a stir; museums are opting for "edutainment" rather than edification and important discourse.

6. The Turner Prize is a contemporary art prize that has often been the subject of controversy and ridicule.

Another glaring example is the recent *Nakte Männer* exhibit at the Leopold Museum in Vienna. Instead of engaging in some semblance of thoughtful discussion, such as why naked men cause such a stir when museums are full of naked women, the Leopold pushed the exhibit by emphasizing the overtly sexual nature of many of the images—including a huge photograph of a reclining naked man in front of the museum, advertisement posters featuring famous nude soccer players, and a lot of media attention surrounding an evening where the viewing public could come and view the exhibit while also naked (shoes were required). Discourse is being replaced by spectacle. Instead of a thoughtful curatorial approach, some museums do demographic research on what “sells” to the museum-going public. Although not technically an art museum, the Leonardo in Salt Lake City opened its *Mummies of the World* exhibit, probably because the research shows that the museum-going public wants to see mummies. Mummies are the perfect abject image—perhaps even better than *Body Worlds* that showed in 2008 at the same venue. Even historically important artwork is shown in a sensationalized manner to attract popular attention rather than in an intellectually and aesthetically responsible manner. This common situation in the current curatorial trend is itself another manifestation of the distrust of meaning in favor of deconstruction and as such deserves exploration as part of the contemporary art phenomenon.

BYU has plunged headfirst into this miasma of contemporary art and art practice. While I applaud the effort to include things that are important now, the Museum of Art (MOA) has often done so without the critical thought commensurate with the aims of the institution. Many of the past and current exhibitions directly address this most current trend of thought in the art world and in museum culture without due consideration and analysis.

In recent years, the MOA has presented several contemporary exhibitions such as works from the Pritzker Collection of contemporary artists, Michael Whiting’s *8-bit Modern*, the exhibitions *We Could Be Heroes* and *Work to Do*, and others that fit easily into the above description of the trend in contemporary art, a trend that eschews connection and understanding in favor of disconnected, deconstructed experience. Most telling of this problem was the 2012–2013 exhibition of the works of Andy Warhol and Takashi Murakami entitled *Think Flat*, which was a noble attempt at putting a very upbeat spin on works that had been donated to the MOA by ex-Andy Warhol Factory girl Ultra Violet. However, it was also an unfortunate example of the contemporary shift

that releases both the art and the curators from critical presentation, which, though common at many museums and a natural outcome of the onus of contemporary art, should nevertheless be questioned vigorously, especially in the context of the mission of BYU.

Warhol and Murakami have indeed been compared, and rightly so, both for the adoption of images and commercial processes associated with the pop art movement of the 1960s. Comparing himself to Warhol has been a deft marketing ploy of Murakami, a strategy in perfect keeping with the spirit of Warhol. However, in the way the BYU exhibition was presented, the joke is on us. The displayed images were not Warhol's attempt at happy, good-feeling propaganda of the celebrity culture of the 1960s, nor were Murakami's drawings possible window-decorations for FAO Schwartz. These works are serious, cynical, pointed criticisms of the cultures that they source. To present them in the fashion that the MOA chose is to buy into the cynicism and the abject shades of consumerism and popular culture. To be fair, perhaps the MOA was offering a subtle and sophisticated appropriation that undercuts pop art's cynicism and puts it to use for Mormonism's more optimistic and celebratory goals and values. But if this is so, then it is so subtle as to be missed. Instead, this exhibition smacked of willful ignorance or intentional misdirection, not education and enlightenment. It adopts the concept rather than examining it.

Warhol picked fairly bland subject matter as fodder for his commentary on pop culture—Campbell's soup, Elvis, Queen Elizabeth, Coke, Marilyn Monroe, the space program; things that are almost unanimously liked and ubiquitously popular. He made himself into a manifestation of pop culture, and in doing so his critique is blatant and straightforward—we are a culture that is obsessed with low art, so why not transform it into high art, especially if the artist can profit from it? Profit and culture are often so intertwined in America; Warhol laughed all the way to the bank, as everyone said and continues to say, “Yes, that's true. I'll take another one of those Soup Cans for a couple of million dollars, please.” He adopted commercial assembly line methods of producing his art, further underscoring his cynical view of the art world. Famously, his “Factory” was also a scene of intense dissolution, which did not, in fact, run like a business. Instead, it was itself a commentary on the culture of America in the 1960s. Even Wikipedia knows what this studio meant:

The silver represented the decadence of the scene, as well as the proto-glam of the early sixties. Silver, fractured mirrors, and tin foil [and floating silver balloons] were the basic decorating materials loved by

the early amphetamine users of the sixties. Billy Name was the perfect person to take this style and cover the whole factory, even the elevator. By combining the industrial structure of the unfurnished studio with the glitter of silver and what it represented, Warhol was commenting on American values, as he did so often in his art. The years spent at the Factory were known as the Silver Era, not solely because of the design, but because of the decadent and carefree lifestyle full of money, parties, drugs and fame.⁷

So, why, again, did we have a party room with floating silver balloons at the MOA? What, exactly, can that mean? It was definitely entertaining, and every kid who came to the museum ended up there, but when a museum makes curatorial choices that pick and choose and obfuscate so carefully, how is this part of a museum's overt mission to inform and educate?

Murakami uses some of the same ideas of manufacturing that inspired Warhol. He, too, has a factory, but it is more like a real factory, with workers and standards of productions. But unlike Warhol, who created a sort of frenzy around himself by his manipulation of his followers, Murakami treats his artists as employees, gives them credit for their work, and famously supports new artists emerging on the scene. Murakami has not mimicked Warhol in his kind of cult following as at the Factory, but he too has become an art world celebrity. He has made himself available for all sorts of publicity and has famously joined forces with Louis Vuitton, making his work a commentary about itself as well as a reflection of class structure. His enormous self-portrait balloons and balloons in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade can attest to his fame and entry into the world of the popular, which is also the subject of his work. In this way, Murakami has perhaps even surpassed Warhol.

While Warhol used familiar icons from popular culture with very little manipulation, Murakami creates his own iconic images that point to familiar types of Japanese anime, but these images are much more than what they appear to be at a cursory glance. Murakami's intent is to pull viewers into thinking that his works are playful, when in fact they are not. Murakami uses juxtaposition as a sort of shield, so that if you are not looking, you do not see. As with his giant mirror-shiny *Oval Buddha*, if you are not examining carefully, there is only a reflection of yourself and the surrounding area from the surface. What is troubling can be easily overlooked; but when you finally see, his work can be intensely disturbing.

7. Wikipedia, "The Factory," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Factory.

A review of a Murakami show in the *Washington Post* by Blake Gopnik conveys these sentiments. Gopnik describes his take on the work he had seen, calling it “caustic. Its work outdoes Goya in revealing our folly, though it puts on a lighthearted air. That makes it even more chilling.”⁸ Gopnik then recounts an appalling conversation he overheard between two mothers standing in front of a Murakami work, titled *Tan Tan Bo Puking*. One mother says to the other that she would like to make a version for this for one of her children’s bedrooms. He illuminates the absurdity of this comment:

On close inspection, it depicts something that looks like a house-size, multi-eyed space alien dripping vomit from its fangs, while one of its tentacles shakes a skull-covered scepter. A nearby wall text helpfully translates the Japanese of one of the picture’s thought balloons, whose less noxious phrases include: “Vomiting uncontrollably, together with the stench of my breath, my phlegm curdles. As my tongue flays to pieces, my headache intensifies, and my eyes have become blind.”⁹

This same scenario of surface observation is what I see scripted by the Murakami exhibition at the MOA. True, the works exhibited are not *Tan Tan Bo Puking*, but they are still part of Murakami’s very precisely articulated body of work. Without adequate context, the work seems nothing more than a Campbell’s soup can or an anime-shaped flower cookie. It is only a commentary on commercialism and pop culture—only fun, only a light-hearted, self-reflexive commentary on our shallowness as a culture. And yet, these are deeply, deeply cynical works. As Murakami himself says, “I express hopelessness.”¹⁰

Of course, BYU would never show his most blatant examples, but their underlying meaning, the contrast between the perky anime and their dark realities is present in *all* of Murakami’s work. His work can be seen on the surface, but it is not meant to be. This exhibition is like showing the superficially inoffensive *Miss Ko2* in isolation and not referencing the fact that this piece was part of the above mentioned obscene *Hiropon*, *Lonely Cowboy* group. *Miss Ko2* has the same underlying toxic message as the other two pieces, but little overtly offensive content. Taken out of

8. Blake Gopnik, “Toying with Catastrophe,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2008, C1, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-05-05/opinions/36826989_1_murakami-toys-takashi-murakami.

9. Gopnik, “Toying with Catastrophe,” C1.

10. Mako Wakasa, “Takashi Murakami,” *Journal of Contemporary Art Online*, <http://www.jca-online.com/murakami.html>.

the specific context of other work by Murakami, its meaning can be easily misunderstood. Taken out of the specific context of contemporary art, it is almost pointless. Murakami is a perfect example of contemporary abjection. His works warrant intense discussion of meaning in contemporary art, but instead they are relegated to superfluity.

My question is *not* about whether BYU should have created this show. My critique is *not* about censorship. My question is why has the MOA chosen to show these works only at the surface? True, the show displayed some vague, short wall texts that index a more serious direction, but the overall show was mostly superficial. When we buy into the surface, we become the very thing that Warhol and Murakami are scrutinizing with their work. This exhibition should have been attempted with more careful consideration and explication of the disturbing currents that underpin these artists' works. This would have been a more thoughtful approach by a museum that celebrates its close alignment with academic excellence and critical thought.

Although I am not an expert on Murakami or Warhol, I happened to be thinking a lot about contemporary art and a little about Murakami when I saw the exhibition, and so I was immediately struck by the presentation. It was not surprising, because it was typical of a contemporary art museum exhibition. However, I found it to be somewhat disingenuous and not serving our audience. I was disturbed because someone (a student perhaps) who experienced those artists in that context for the first time would come away with a two-dimensional, superficial, inadequate understanding of what that art is, what it means, and where it fits in the history of art. Furthermore, I can easily imagine a student coming away from the exhibition without fair warning and Googling "Murakami," thinking to get some other anime and instead pulling up *Lonesome Cowboy*. In fact, I saw that scenario happen.

A better example of a successful exhibition from BYU was *The Matter of Words* in 2011. Adam Bateman's giant tower of books was more than enough to frame the idea and begin the discussion of the use of words in the contemporary world. The circular space kept the viewer going back to the tower and kept the focus on the subject of the exhibit—words in the contemporary world. This show was only marred by the varied quality of the work. I would venture to guess that most visitors would have a hard time recalling anything other than the tower of books. Still, I felt like the exhibition was almost there. A little expansion, a little push and this show about *words* would have really *said* something. A less successful example would be the *We Could Be Heroes* exhibition,

which took on an extremely interesting aspect of the contemporary world. Without context, it mostly felt like a garage sale of random art, loosely tied together with a theme. The *Work to Do* exhibition had the same effect. Some of the work itself was nice, but it was not held together by the post-hoc explanation in wall text. If viewers did not understand this work before they entered the museum, they probably would not understand it when exiting.

Deconstruction in contemporary art creates a conundrum because saying that the means of discussing meaning (language and art) is meaningless trumps any future discussion of meaning. But still, it may be done. Language, verbal and aesthetic, can be argued to be integral to consciousness and, thus, language presupposes meaning. It is not logical to assume because language sometimes does not convey meaning that it never does. Yes, if we think about it very carefully, words seem to be inadequate. It is easy to feel that there is no real connection between oneself and this arbitrary group of sounds and symbols. There are many times when language—words as well as art—is inadequate and fails to make the connection we intend. However, this denies the fact that many times, language also makes connections. All humans have language, I think, precisely because it does make connections. The fact that it often fails does not extinguish its utility. Nor does it contradict the fact that language can add meaning to experience. Symbols, language, and art can actually expand and deepen meaning and make connections that are well beyond the great gulfs between the sign and the signified. It does make sense that pre-language and basic bodily functions are important. However, it does not follow that there can be nothing else—that this is the end. Language, words as well as art, can connect our pre-language functions to our experience, to our minds, and even to the universe.

We must therefore use language to talk about these trends in art. If we do not, then contemporary art and contemporary art museums are only a meaningless tribute to our meaninglessness. We must acknowledge that aesthetic sensibility is at least as essential to us as language. Our times have produced a contemporary art that reflects the feeling of alienation in our society as well as the emphasis on pre-language bodily experiences, and as such these expressions are perfectly understandable. They are not, however, perfectly reasonable. Art, like language, has to do with meaning. It can question meaning but cannot wholly abandon it. Even the words themselves, “meaning” and “meaningless,” attest to this by their components. One is obviously a negation of the other, but it doesn’t work the other way around. “Meaningless” requires there first be

“meaning.” You cannot “say” nothing. Art is basically construction and cannot wholly be described in terms of deconstruction. Much of contemporary art is like a joke that makes you say “that was funny” but does not make you laugh. It is reflecting a concept of meaning that is intrinsically antithetical to meaning and as such is not satisfying. Deconstruction has changed the historical question of the seat of meaning by the statement that there is no meaning—but it has not changed our desire to find an answer to the question of meaning. In fact, I would submit that the purpose of a museum is to help us make connections, to find meaning. This is even more important with contemporary art. If it is the art of our time, then what is our time saying? Such questions of construction must be attempted.

Recently, I attended a John Cage 100-year retrospective at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg. This exhibition, though in many ways typical of contemporary shows, was in other ways extraordinary. It did not rely on shock value, nor did it rely on wall text alone to convey meaning and factoids. Instead, I was taken on a journey through Cage’s worldview by seeing and experiencing his art. The focus of this exhibit was to show where Cage’s ideas originated, how he worked and thought, and how his ideas influenced and continue to influence artists and musicians. Until I saw that show, what little I knew of him did not make me particularly interested to know more. And yet I left that show in awe. For example, one of his most iconic pieces is 4’33”, where he sat at a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds playing nothing, although he occasionally turned pages. Everything in the exhibition built up to this seminal moment in Cage’s career and then traced how his influence spread in the contemporary art world. There were fascinating examples of his planning and notations that showed his thought process. There was work of other artists who were moving in the same direction as Cage. There were interactive pieces, including a room full of record players where museumgoers could create their own John Cage experience. The show included contemporary interpretations of 4’33”, including a wall of computer monitors, where versions of 4’33” came to life through crowdsourcing. There was a hallway filled with video interpretations of 4’33” by another artist who filmed silent nature. Before I entered, I understood this piece to be about the limits of music, the sounds of the audience, and the abnegation of control by the composer. And yet the Museum der Moderne gave me so much more.

The show directed my thoughts but also gave me room to think. I felt as though I learned something important, something that mattered.

Most importantly, I experienced the art. I did not come away thinking, “Now I have more background and information.” I came away thinking, “Now I get it!” Such a moment should be the goal of contemporary shows. The curation needs to begin with a clear understanding of the art and its significance. It cannot stop at the “wow.” It must make things more clear. Lucidity is so important with contemporary art because the very nature of the art makes understanding particularly difficult. But understanding is, nevertheless, the purpose of a museum. As Neil Postman says in *The End of Education*:

Answers to the question, “What does it mean to be a human being?” must be given within the context of a specific moment in history and must inevitably be addressed to living people who, as always, are struggling with the problems of moral, psychological, and social survival. . . . A museum is an instrument of survival and sanity. A museum, after all, tells a story. And like the oral and written literature of any culture, its story may serve to awaken the better angels of our nature or to stimulate what is fiendish. A museum can serve to clarify our situation or obfuscate it, to tell us what we need to know or what is useless.¹¹

We must examine more carefully what contemporary art is, why it is, and what it is. The antidote to the current trend that has produced vacuous art in vacuous displays is to insist on discussing even the lack of meaning. Vacuity may be the trend, and it may follow naturally from contemporary art, but it is not an imperative. It is important that places like the MOA, which have the attention of the art-going public, use the opportunity not just to present the forms of contemporary art but to understand them.

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11. Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 165.