

The Problem of Originality

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The whole idea of originality in art is relatively modern. In the past what most societies have looked for in their art was not something new, but the continuity of a tradition, the handing on of the values shared by that society. It is only since the Renaissance that the idea of originality arose as something to be valued, closely connected to the idea of the unique individuality of the subject.

With the advent of modernism all the defining characteristics of art held so dear since the Renaissance were dismantled. Every characteristic was rejected except one: originality. This became the unique characteristic that defined quality in modern art. Along side it as a necessary corollary was a focus on the unique individuality of the artist.

But since the late 1960s there has been a concerted effort in Cultural Theory to undermine the idea of the unique individuality of the subject and the whole concept of originality. Frederick Jameson articulates this idea of the end of individuality as 'The Death of the Subject':

'The great modernisms were predicated ...on the invention of a personal, private style as unmistakable as your fingerprint...the modernist aesthetic is organically linked to the concept of a unique self a unique individuality which could be expected to forge its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unmistakable style. Yet today from any number of distinct perspectives...individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past ...one might even describe the concept of the unique individual as ...ideological.' (Jameson in Brooker 1992: 167-8)

Post Modernist theory also undermines the whole idea of originality. Jameson has written that: '...in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible all that is left is to imitate dead styles...pastiche.' (Ibid:169)

This perspective is echoed by Rosalind Krauss in 'The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths'. She writes that: '...modernism and the avant garde are functions of ...the discourse of originality...' (Krauss 1986:162) and referring to Sherrie Levine's appropriation of photographs by Walker Evans writes:



Figure 1: Sherrie Levine Untitled (After Walker Evans #3 1936) 1981 gelatin silver print

'Levine's work explicitly deconstructs the modernist notion of origin...replacing it instead with the postmodernist discourse of the copy.' (Ibid 170)

When I read these extracts to students, one said: 'Thank goodness - I don't have to worry about being original any more. ' I said to him: 'You try going to curators with work that looks like someone else's - they'll turn you away saying that it's too derivative. You may say: "haven't you heard - originality doesn't exist any more", but they'll reply: "That's in the world of theory, we operate in the real world." As Orwell said: 'To believe some things you have to be an intellectual. No normal person could be so stupid.'

Elaine Sturtevant is an artist who foreshadowed Sherrie Levine in appropriating the art of other people.



Figure 2: Elaine Sturtevant Duchamp Relache 1967 black & white photograph 30 x 25cm

She made this photograph in 1967. It's a copy of the 1924 photograph of the tableau in Picabia's *Relache* after Cranach's Adam and Eve with Duchamp posing as Adam.



Figure 3: Lucas Cranach Adam and Eve c1532 oil on panel

But what Sturtevant wrote was: 'There's a difference between probing originality and saying it is the death of originality. You'd have to be a mental retard to claim the death of originality.' (Grosenick 2001: 509)

We might reasonably assume that Frederick Jameson and Rosalind Krauss are not mental retards. Why then is their position shared by most theorists? I think that at the heart of their thinking lies a deeply ideologically driven attitude. Because the concept of the unique individual is part of right wing political discourse it is regarded as being ideologically tainted and out of bounds. But in fact there is no logical reason at all to support this conclusion.

We can accommodate their position on originality however by distinguishing between historical innovation and originality. The history of Western art since the Greeks has been marked by long periods of continued tradition, interrupted by short revolutions. We can identify three such radical paradigm shifts in the last 2,000 years: at the juncture between Greek art and Christian art, at the beginning of the Renaissance and in the 50 year inception of modernism.

Radical innovation belongs to these 3 periods of rupture. Once the new paradigm has been defined however this type of innovation ceases. The Renaissance paradigm was complete with Raphael. Originality did not cease however. Each of the great artists since the high Renaissance has produced art that bears the recognisable mark of its author's individuality. To claim that originality is no longer possible, now that the period of heroic modernism is over, is just as absurd as to have made this claim at the time of Raphael.

Why am I so sure that originality will never disappear? It's because in my view, originality is the product of the individuality of the artist. This is not just a product of the unique genetic inheritance of each individual plus the particularity of each individual's childhood history. On

top of that each person is situated in a context which is unique to a particular location, a particular culture and a particular period in history. Each generation articulates a context which has never before occurred in the history of humanity. To this can be added the fact that each individual will experience this context differently from anyone else.

But if originality is the product of our individuality doesn't this mean it's guaranteed to happen automatically? As Rosalind Krauss says with ironic scorn before dismissing the idea as 'logically fraudulent': 'With his own self as the origin of his work that production will have the same uniqueness as he, the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes.' (Krauss 1986:160)

But in fact Krauss's scorn is naive. Of course the uniqueness of the individual doesn't automatically confer uniqueness on the product of that individual, because as Freud has shown the location of that uniqueness is the UCS. Our individuality is deep down in the true psychological and spiritual core of our being. Overlying this are layers upon layers of accretions which have accumulated since early childhood.

Children are able to make a direct connection between their inner feeling and their products. Every child is an artist. What then happens to the adult that prevents the claim that Joseph Beuys made, that every person is an artist from really happening? Between the ages of 7 and 10 the child loses that spontaneity as the mind becomes more aware of adult models and importantly more aware of the expectations and critical response of the other person. In the end the adult becomes frozen by the perceived critical expectations of the other.

When we do something that we are serious about that critical gaze is always with us, it is within our own psyche like Freud's super ego, the internalisation of our parents approval and disapproval. It looks over our shoulder whenever we make a mark. Of course in our professional practice that critical gaze of our parents is replaced by a generalised tutor, critic and role model – the artworld from whom we would want approval.

The need to give form to our identity through what we do is basic to us all. For artists it is the central core of their practice. The very nature of originality however poses a threat. It is self-revelation. It reveals the subject's most private feelings so that the artist stands naked in an act of self-exposure in front of a scrutinising public. It's against all the instincts for survival to present ourselves in all our vulnerability to be judged by the outside world. What we tend to do is to erect defences to counter the threat of this situation, defences which are outside the scope of this paper.

At this stage I want to make a clear distinction between the realisation of individuality and ego. Art as an effect of individuality has nothing to do with an ego focussed art whose main reason for being, is to draw attention to the producer. Such a focus on ego actually acts as a barrier preventing the expression of individuality.

Let me illustrate the difference by reference to walking. We've all had the experience of seeing someone walk towards us and long before their face comes into recognisable focus we know who they are. We were able to recognise the rhythm of their walk.

Why is it then that we can have such a clear manifestation of our individuality in our walk and yet have difficulty in realising it in our art? It's because no one has ever criticised our walk or will judge us by our walk so we're as free as children to walk in a natural spontaneous way. If however we are judged by our walk because we are trained ballet dancers then we may lose our individuality and adopt an academic walk that is not true to ourselves. If we are suddenly thrust into fame because we've managed to get a part in Neighbours, then we may well walk in a way that betrays our ego, our sense that we are really somebody special. Our natural walk then loses its relationship to our individuality.

I also want to make it clear that I am not privileging a subjective type of art. What I am saying is that in every mode of art the individuality of the artist is apparent, not only in de Kooning or Baselitz but also in Hans Haake, Daniel Buren or Mary Kelly.

It's apparent in the instructional art of Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner or Yoko Ono which the artist has never touched. It would be peculiar if it wasn't. If something as mechanical as walking has individuality it would be strange indeed if something as complex as the human brain didn't have a far greater degree of individuality.

Take the example of Duchamp's notion of inframince (d'Harnoncourt and McShine: 37) – a concept that recognises certain barely discernable sensory phenomena, like the sound and feeling you experience when you are wearing corduroy trousers and they rub against each other. Now what I'm claiming is that this idea is as saturated with Duchamp's individuality as are his objects, that this idea has all the surprise, the lateral thinking, the playful characteristics and the radical nature of The Fountain. You could not mistake this idea for one by Kosuth, it has none of the serious propositional closeness to philosophy of say



Figure 4: Joseph Kosuth Wittgenstein's Colour 1998 neon tubing
13 x 12cm

Nor could it be mistaken for one of Yoko Ono's. It has none of the social engagement of say



Figure 5: Yoko Ono Cut Piece 1964 performance

But how do we reclaim that natural connection with our real self, how do we evade the inhibiting power of the conscious mind? The one place not to start is by trying to be original. Like walking it just happens, but it only happens when you forget all about it. It is here that the material nature of the work comes in. By engaging with a material practice whether that material is clay, paint, steel, textile, or digital video, we divert the critical mind as we indulge in a play with the material. Play is a child's natural work, just as work is an adult's natural play provided that the work in question is in keeping with his/her natural talents. So I'm not talking about play as a recreation, I'm talking about play as a totally absorbing compulsion, like the way in which a child at play is totally absorbed by the delight of following completely the instincts inscribed within his/her being.

By engaging with the material we become absorbed in what we're doing and naturally tend to work in a way that is our own. Its then that interesting things start to happen as we make connections on an intuitive level – connections the meaning of which is may not always be apparent.

I tell students: 'the 1st step in finding your individuality within your practice is to say you like this artist's work and not that one's. At a later stage you might want to work in a way that is reminiscent of another artist. This too is an essential part of finding your own way. It's like the way you work out your dress image by trying out different looks and finding out what you feel great in.'

A 1st year student recently showed me a few pieces of card that were painted with a really alive feeling like he was having fun doing it. But he said with some bitterness 'I can't paint like that any more - I'm ripping off Frank Auerbach – they're obviously Auerbachs – I was told that last week!' But in fact that's precisely what he should have been doing. Gradually his own style would have evolved perhaps by rejecting this way of working entirely.

Being at art school is a time when initially at least you don't have to be original. This is something that develops slowly as your work progresses.

Carl Rogers the eminent American psychotherapist has made a study of creativity. He found that 3 inner conditions most favoured creativity:

1. Openness to 'inner and outer experiencing' (Rogers 1967 355) – I would translate this to students saying: 'you should have the attitude that you want to fully and completely participate in and experience everything that's on offer and to put aside attitudes that already exist. Even negative experiences confirm your direction.'
2. The development of an 'internal locus of evaluation' (Ibid: 354).
I translate this saying: 'you need to exercise critical judgement on your work but it must be located within your own subjectivity and not be just the internalisation of other people's judgement. You must be asking am I satisfied with it? Does it have the feeling of me in action? Does it define or delineate in some way my position, my ideas? Of course this doesn't mean that you should reject the criticism of others. That needs to be listened to with a readiness to accept it, but only when it resonates with your own feelings, when you can see the sense in it and own it for yourself.'
3. The last point that Rogers makes is that the activity that is closest to the nature of the individual and allows the greatest creative potential will have the quality and feeling that play has to a child, a point I've already made.

In order for the student to be able to develop these inner conditions for creativity we have to try to produce an environment that most favours their emergence. In general this needs to be one of support, safety and freedom. The student needs to feel valued but at the same time the tutor needs to be honest. We do no one any favours by withholding criticism or by pretending something is good when it isn't.

Of course the development of a personal voice does not guarantee that the product is any good or even interesting. Different individuals come with differing degrees of talent and differing degrees of obsession and tenacity. But these are character traits over which we as educators have little or no influence.

Another factor that impinges upon work in most art schools today is the presence of theory and the expectation that students will give an exegesis of their work. Peter Timms in his book 'What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?' describes the process of undertaking a PhD saying: 'You would begin by writing a proposal defining your research goals... in other words the idea must precede the work and the exhibition of the work must confirm the idea. Consequently right from the start painters who want to work intuitively are at a distinct disadvantage if not out of the running altogether.' (Timms 2004:31) I think the point applies to practitioners in any medium and of course is not confined to PhDs.

It is essential in my view to maintain the primacy of practice over theory. The stated aim of any practice should be used only as a provisional starting point, that is then modified and redefined as that practice proceeds being always a postscript not a prescription of the work. If we are not careful to maintain this primacy, we end up with a use of theory, which is inhibiting instead of being liberating. The work then becomes just an illustration of meaning rather than an exploration through an engagement with a material practice.

Nor is the answer an elimination of theory. All this does is to make the resultant artist feel disempowered by a culture of contemporary art that he/she doesn't understand. The important thing is to equip students so that they can use the language and ideas of visual culture for their own ends, filtered through the lens of their own individuality to achieve the freedom they need.

One of the interesting things about Cindy Sherman's work is the way that she found her style.



Figure 6: Cyndi Sherman Untitled Film Still #35 1979 black & white photograph 10 x 8 inches

Works like this have been amongst the most frequently cited examples of feminist photography. So you might imagine Cindy Sherman working from a deeply theoretical position. But in fact like much original work there was no sense of it being deliberately worked out at all.

She recalls that: 'As a child I would spend a lot of hours at the mirror fooling with makeup and dressing up...' She continued this game as a student. When asked to do a serial piece, a friend suggested: 'You have all this makeup, why don't you do a series of photographs of you putting it on.' She continues: 'So I did this series and the piece got all this feedback. So it dawned on me that I'd hit on something.' (Sandler 1996: 409) The critic Ingrid Sischy has written: 'Sherman found her voice as an artist precisely because she didn't try anything fancy. She simply started recording what she was already up to. That's why this work is so authentic and convincing.' (Ibid 410)

Certainly art can't be said any more than a building can be danced or a symphony painted. Art proceeds by way of an engagement with the material. The resultant object is a way of communicating what can't be said verbally. Wittgenstein ended *The Tractatus* with the well-known words: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.' (Wittgenstein

1922: 74) He could have put it another way: 'What we cannot speak about has to be danced, or painted, or made into a digital video.' It's precisely art's ability to communicate what cannot be said that makes art so valued in today's society.

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