“Because I Said So!”: Conceptual Art’s Contribution to Capitalism’s Limitation of Autonomous Thought
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The religions of India such as Hinduism believe that the divine is taken in through the eyes, which explains the country’s emphasis on diverse colors and intricate sculpture. The Hindu temples I experienced in my travels exhibit detailed painting on every one of the hundreds of statues that line the entirety of the religious structures and the Indians dedicated to the temples faithfully see to the maintenance of the temples’ beauty. I witnessed houses painted in bright colors, magnificent saris worn by the women, and colorful graffiti design freely lining the walls of businesses, and the collection of all of these truly beautiful experiences acted as an inspiration to me to find that same beauty when I returned to America.

However, in the wake of my trip, I returned to find a very different culture than the one I thought I had left. Contrary to the steadfast belief in the integration of creative visual stimulation into daily life as I witnessed in societies like India, modern America, focusing on the time following the work of contemporary artists like Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Kosuth, rejects the possibility and validity of beauty in the real, objective world. Conceptual art in particular appears to collude with our capitalistic economy to purposefully eradicate beauty as an important “useless” component to the value of our human nature, disguised as an artistic movement to reveal the true description of our reality.

Philosopher Roger Scruton quoted artist Duchamp when he claimed that, “those who look for beauty in art are simply out of touch with modern reality”. According to Scruton, conceptual artists are convinced that the world we live in is “disturbing”, so art should follow suit in its presentations (“Why Beauty Matters”). In the 1968 interview depicted in Scruton’s
“Why Beauty Matters”, Duchamp claimed that he doesn’t “care about the word art because it has been so discredited” while the interviewer countered that Duchamp is one of the contributors to this demolition of the meaning of art. The critical point that conceptual artists miss is their own responsibility and participation in the loss of beauty. They are not simply reporters of the truth, but they are the architects of this new dismal reality.

Before this new, unfriendly stride into the art world, art from figures like Rembrandt was admired for its aesthetic value. Among the three philosophical definitions of art, these classical paintings and sculptures adhered to representation and form. The task rested in the representation of our perception of stimuli as closely as humanly possible. The artist also found the challenge of creating an aesthetically pleasing art piece, which relied on the form. It can be a bit of a mystery to figure out, but the form had to make the onlookers say that the piece was made with grace and it was thoughtful to detail (Slater).

The conceptual art movement harshly rejected all of these definitions and made art nothing more than an empty word. Duchamp claimed in an interview depicted in Scruton’s “Why Beauty Matters” that art did not have to be anything more than an idea and no actual art needed to exist to prove its worth. We simply have to trust the artist’s evaluation of the idea. Unlike Scruton’s belief that beauty, especially in art, is an objectively-found need for the prospering of human beings, conceptual artists believe that art is a subjective hobby and no one can tell them that their pieces are not art. It is the artist’s word against the public’s word and the artist would know better about his or her own piece, giving them more credibility. This is what would be known as the “de-definition” of art (Slater). An artist’s independence from social opinion and approval holds the opportunity for the individuals in question to create more genuine and autonomous art, however it appears to me to have an opposite effect. Cutting the ties from
the pressures of society to produce acceptable art has resulted in the reduction of creativity and authenticity.

For a popular and moderately well-known example, Duchamp’s most famous art piece *Fountain* resides in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, similar to his other pieces in various other museums around the world (“Marcel Duchamp”). The art museum is a tool of the capitalistic society utilized by modern America to establish a useful function of art and an illusion that human beings under such a society still maintain autonomy and self-expression. The best, most expressive art has supposedly been bought and displayed in these museums. Even before the conceptual art movement, artwork has been displayed in art museums to exhibit the artist’s skills and to appreciate the piece itself, or so we have believed. Museums such as the National Gallery of Art is free to the public, but I have experienced locally and in my travels that there are still museums that charge admission fees and, even when they are free to the public, usually only part of the gallery is shown. The capitalistic attitude of profiting from all skills and opportunities has allowed select groups to restrict our availability to beauty, creating stronger control over a person’s perception of the world they live in as well as over his or her choices. Of course, the Philadelphia Museum of Art that houses one of Duchamp’s most famous works charges twenty dollars for adults to view the gallery.

The art museum redefines a person’s perception of the world in which he or she lives by creating a criterion that determines who is eligible to enjoy the uselessness of beauty. The only way to gain access to this luxury is to subject oneself to a job in order to gain the means to pay the admission of the museum. The art is not displayed for all to see as we are told, but it remains behind locked doors. Scruton denies that beauty, in the form of art in this case, is a luxury. He believes that it is “not just a subjective thing, but a universal need of humans beings” and without
it, we subject each other to a “spiritual desert” and strictly “utilitarian” way of living (“Why Beauty Matters”).

This problem has evolved, however, into a two-fold burden for the people who do not hold the control of this established system of trading beauty for money and vice versa. On the one hand, “the individual pays by sacrificing his time, his consciousness, his dreams” (Marcuse 100) by working to pay an admission fee to witness a necessary component to the welfare of the human being. This dilemma is a tragedy, no matter what is shown inside the galleries. However, once the civilian gains access to the gallery, we have another problem, provided by the conceptual artists. We have a reconstruction of beauty with the display of pieces like *Fountain* and, with the help of the art museum, this new conception of beauty and art redirects the civilian’s attention toward a lifestyle that better suits the benefitting ruling group. The new obsession of the museum-goer is not technique or skill anymore. We yearn to see what these modern artists will think of next to push the boundaries of our established definition of “art”.

Duchamp displayed a urinal with a fake signature, demanding that it was art because he said so. Other artists after him have decided to follow suit and have given in to this rejection of beauty and skill, such as Michael Craig. Scruton takes time to talk to Craig, the artist of *An Oak Tree*, which features a photograph of a glass of water on a glass shelf. Craig believes that Duchamp was trying to show that anything can be beautiful, even if we do not think of it as so at first (“Why Beauty Matters”). Craig interprets Duchamp’s intentions too much. Just as I believe Scruton and even Duchamp himself would disagree, I also disagree with Craig’s interpretation, because Duchamp’s urinal was a blatantly sarcastic mockery of our effort to showcase beauty. He did not want to make the urinal beautiful or want anyone to think it was beautiful. As Scruton
exclaimed in his production, “something has a value when it has a use” and beauty has become an optional “side effect” (“Why Beauty Matters”).

In the rising utilitarian style of perceiving the things and people in our world, we have given beauty a purpose besides its “useless” self, by giving it a monetary value. We sell famous pieces of art for millions of dollars and, when that price is tagged on a piece, that artwork’s value is redefined by a new sole factor – money. If we continue to maintain such a tight correlation between the degree of beauty and an object’s given monetary value, it will only reinforce a civilian’s interest to make money. Even worse, the civilian will soon internalize monetary value and begin evaluating him or herself solely by his or her productivity and position in the workforce. In Ecclesiastes, it is said that, while “a feast is made for merriment and wine gives joy to the living… money answers for everything” (The New American Bible, Eccl. 10:19). In our modern American society, we live up to this prediction by living by the rule of the “economic whip” and by allowing the “affluent society” to commandeer nature, beauty, and our social relations with one another (Marcuse xxiii). In a timing that appears to be in response to this shift from intrinsic to materialistic value, the philosopher Marcuse targeted the beneficiaries of this newly developing “cult of ugliness” (Scruton) to reveal that this utilitarian restriction on our enjoyment and autonomy is not simply how the world works, but it is how the “affluent society” tells us it works.

Conceptual artists, for the simple price of money and fame, have become accomplices in the capitalist’s system to dominate over people’s taste, thus restricting and regulating their perceptions of what is valuable and the actions that follow those perceptions. Marcuse believes that beauty is linked to the pleasure principle, which is the antagonist to the reality principle or the governing force within us when we first experience “lack” in our childhood. The reality
principle is now the instrument which the dominating group in our society uses to create specific benefits for themselves. When the group in power of the system (in the art and political world alike) learns to lift themselves higher at the expense of others, Marcuse believes that we are no longer ruled by an authority that creates benefits for everyone involved, but we are dominated. The worst part about the domination is the anonymity, which is our lack to recognize who is truly demanding this utilitarian lifestyle from us. This power, to the average civilian, is linked to the overwhelming “system” against which we have no hopes of rebelling (Marcuse 98). We are told by characters like Duchamp that the lack in our lives is simply how it (i.e., society in general) is and we must find alternative ways to cope with a cold reality.

When beauty is restricted into museums, our pleasure principle is kept in check while our reality principle, which has been defined for us to tell us that our productivity and our consumption determines our worth, reigns. This predicament is synonymous with the institution of admission fees in our galleries. However, when beauty is destroyed and malformed rather than just restricted, as it has been with the advent of conceptual art, the pleasure principle is also twisted and distorted to be used as a tool for further productivity. Conceptual art has found a method to surpass simple restraint of our pleasure principle and actually manipulate that principle to conform to the will and interests of the dominating group. The civilians of this society are “efficiently manipulated and organized” to think that they are “free”, thus subduing any spirit of rebellion or liberation from this established system (Marcuse xiii). We begin to believe that conceptual art is what we wanted to see all along and that we always wanted work to command the bulk of our lives, coincidentally leaving no time for autonomous thought.

We no longer are paying to see skill, technique, and beauty in a natural form that enlightens and makes us stop to think of things greater than ourselves, as Scruton discusses in
“Why Beauty Matters”. We pay to see everyday items, such as a urinal or a rumpled, unmade bed, and we are coerced to search for meaning in these lackluster items. Art is forced to succumb to the economic tenet of productivity. Duchamp’s “ready-mades” are the prime example. The urinals can be mass-manufactured, as it has been replicated easily seventeen times (Hollander). This effect of making as much of a product for as little amount of effort as possible has idolized the core features of capitalism, such as cookie-cutter replication, quick manufacturing, and a devastatingly marginal amount of creative thought. This mind-numbing minimalism and Scruton’s very definition of the destruction of creativity is more than just a most recent movement in the art world that we just don’t understand right now. It is the transformation of our values to appreciate “work… without satisfaction in itself” and with “no room for an original… ‘mastery instinct’” (Marcuse 81). It is all the burden of the beholder to find meaning in a meaningless world, where the fruit of our labors have no intrinsic value to the individual. It seems to me to be a twisted sense of existentialism, with the responsibility but in the absence of the freedom.

However, this eradication of beauty has not convinced every one of its merit. Fortunately, America is not an isolated country and influences from other countries act as a counter attack to this devaluation of art. One such influence is a street artist who acts under the pseudonym “Banksy”. Unlike Duchamp, Banksy articulates a new movement of art in the mass production, but preserved the value of technique and skill like the traditional painters and sculptors. He creates stencils for his graffiti, but ultimately personally crafts the ideas, the stencils, and the spray-painted art itself. The process commands careful thought and planning, as well as much more effort and autonomous expression than Duchamp’s ready-mades.
In an interview that appeared in the Smithsonian magazine, Banksy dares to comment on the capitalization of his artwork – the very artwork that aims to tear down the civilian’s complacency with the established system: “‘I love the way capitalism finds a place – even for its enemies. It’s definitely boom time for the discontent industry’ (Ellsworth-Jones). The capitalistic attitude of relating everything we do or say to the primary focus of “uninterrupted production and consumption” (Marcus xii) is so entwined in our daily lives that we have found a way to embed it in the opposition’s efforts. Art galleries and collectors have sought out to buy the buildings where Banksy’s artwork appears, cut out the graffiti, demolish the rest of the building, then put the work up on exhibit in an art museum that has been described previously. The efforts to capitalize his controversial artwork have not devalued the content, but only cracked open the capitalistic system to show its dominating and repressive substance. Like Marcuse’s “tears in the technological veil” that allow the civilians to directly witness their repression, the display of Banksy’s artwork both on the streets and in the galleries is an effort to reveal to us the actual reality, not the reality that the conceptual artists and the dominating economic groups wish for us to believe.

The modern American values of productivity and consumption are a far cry from the preserved traditional values of cultures that enjoy, admire, and respect beauty like Chennai, India mentioned in the beginning of this discussion. This repressive obsession with capitalistic success will lead to the total and imminent destruction of beauty, a collective and essential component to human flourishing and the quality of human projects. As a result of this political and social domination, “men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions” (Marcuse 45). However, there is always an opportunity or at least a potential hope of rebellion even in the strictest of societies and Banksy is a great example of that. No matter how much his artwork is
capitalized, his content and messages about the contradicting values of our way of living remain to crack open the minds of the repressed civilians. There is still a hope that we can return to the age of beauty rather than continuing to follow the “cult of ugliness”, as Scruton calls it, and we can do this through art still.
Works Cited

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