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Post-Modernism

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Post-Modernism as Plurality Stitched Together  
Post-Modernism as Not-Segregation  
Post-Modernism as a Sandwich  
Post-Modernism as a Choose-Your-Own Adventure Meta-Narrative



of interest

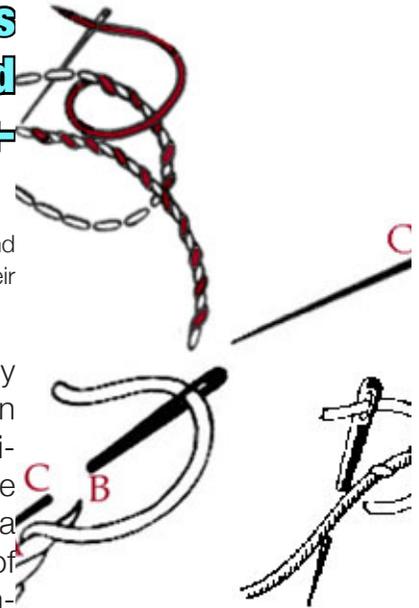
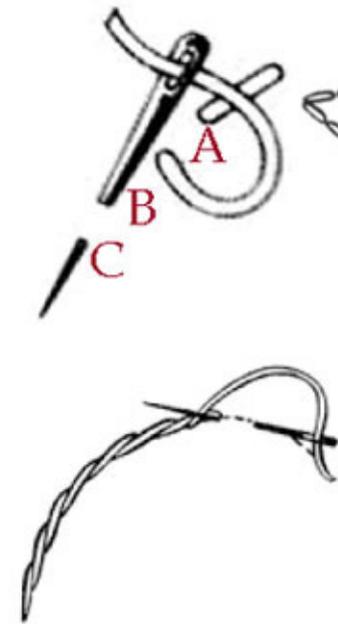


**Duke & Battersby**  
*Beauty Plus Pity*

## A Gratuitous Stitch of Ekphrasis Intended to Lay the Game-Board for a Motley Discussion of Post- Modernism and Charles Jencks

(Regarding the Spirit Guides created by Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, which greet visitors at the entrance to their current show, *Beauty Plus Pity* at RoCo.)

Atop neon green plinths, flawless taxidermy is given lift, wrapped with swaddling care in tight-stitched doll clothes and ramshackle pirate gear. The splendid elements clothing the nakedness of a tiny lamb, a baby wolf, and a hedgehog has the capacity to pull the hearts of vegetarians and hunters (alike) in two contradictory directions.



The display is clearly meant to honor the bodies of these beautiful creatures, sacrificed for the high purpose of art (or at least re-purposed from the well ordered cabinets of scientific research). The tiny lamb, its neighbor the baby wolf, and their friend the hedgehog are tenderly treated with the care of lace and bead work, velvet lining, and folds of silk. They are wrapped like flowers in whim and fancy.



This irreverent display makes a joke of death and ruthlessly degrades the pure forms of baby animals. By stitching their anatomies in to a parallel alignment with those of aristocratic dolls and pirates, the artists have managed to degrade, with suggested childlike imperialism, a sacrifice that our Native American predecessors would have taken great pains to honor.

The intention of the show *Beauty Plus Pity*, in to which the Spirit Guides are charged with ushering gallery-goers, is to *attract, repel, and astonish* (according to an anonymously penned description of the show distributed at RoCo). The contents of the exhibition, which range from simple projected animation and found video footage to seating design and graphic guides to existential philosophy, are quilted together as incomplete and often contradictory vignettes in to a strangely cohesive "*Day in the Life of the World*" (the subtext to the show's title).

# Plurality Can Be Stitched Together

In his description of Post-Modernism, Charles Jencks acknowledges a movement from the singular, industrial production of Modernism to fractured, small nodes of production in a Post-Modern world. For Jencks, this fractured existence is a type of plurality (a simultaneous existence of contradictory elements) which Jencks outlines as essential at the beginning of his book *What is Post-Modernism?*

*The idea of plurality is essential to Post-Modernism; the necessity of crossing boundaries and mixing genres is also a norm, which I will reaffirm.*

(pg 6, *What is Post-Modernism?*)

Plurality in Jencks' terms is rendered in part as a rhythmic pulse sending laughing fissures through Modernism's attempts at consistency and homogeneity. In *Beauty Plus Pity*, Duke and Battersby have stitched together animation, sanded & oiled logs, taxidermy, clothing, and drawings.

In any clean, well-ordered Modernist studio, sawdust will ruin animation tools, taxidermy will bloody a log of cream-colored maple, and sewing will confuse the easy application of walnut oil with fussy bits of flammable string and cloth. This is a game of technical rock-paper-scissors, and it embodies an end to Modernism's lines between unified bodies of work and material purity. The mechanical leviathan of a steel fabrication factory that works only in steel and defends the visual rights of steel when it is incorporated in to a building project is here exploded in to a colorful spectrum of rust along with the Modernist mandate that an artist work primarily in a single medium to whose subtleties they must bind themselves through cohesive periods or series.



Post Modernism fuzzes the boundaries between fabricated materials, techniques, ideologies, and nations. Jencks notes that we live in an age of migration and mixed national identity, and then goes on to identify this state as *a consequence of the emergent, global culture, a post-modern phenomenon* (pg 9, *What is Post-Modernism?*) The movement from material purity to genre-mixing in art has a parallel in the movement from crisp culture delineations (or even White-Cube-Modernisation-Anywhere-Culture) to cultural pluralism in a more broad sense.

Accepting pluralism is the predecessor to defeating segregation. Jencks writes that Modernism viewed the First World War as the natural result and justice of a civilization filthy with the complexities of eclecticism, class-distinctions, over decoration, and corruption. War, coupled with the leviathan of Modernism, would purify this overgrown mess. Corbusier employed the term 'vacuum cleaning period'. (pg 25, *What is Post-Modernism?*)

Ornament has surely been a symbol of class distinctions and segregation (a snooty shorthand for *we can buy fancier things than you*) but the solution offered by Modernism was a cast iron steamroller. Its goal was to squash ornament altogether in hopes of burying the segregation associated with it. Post-Modernism responds with a shout of energetic abandon and launches compressed soil in to the air for all to see. It revels in the contradictions and tensions between differing perspectives like a two-year-old playing in the mud. In tune with Derrida's notion of differance,

*(an) intense commitment to pluralism is perhaps the only thing that unites every post-modern movement, and also something that marks the tradition as a Western invention, the part of the world where pluralism is most developed.*  
(pg 29, *What is Post-Modernism?*)

## Segregation Leads to Alienation

In an essay on genre-mixing titled Teaching Secret Philosophy, Duke & Battersby liken the progression of art history (up until Modernism) to a wedge, which starts wide and terminates with a tiny black pinhole. The problem with the pinhole is that, though it is extremely focused on finding the "hard-cores" of materials and avoids the traps of mass culture (like slapstick and "beauty"), it allows very little surface area to come in to contact with everyday life. The result is a self-referential art. Artists become a collective *dog stuck eating its own tail for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.*

Jencks agrees. In his “Calvinist” church model of a Modernist kingdom, the high priest Clement Greenberg decrees the irreducible goal of focusing on the essence of each art language – the “truth” of pigment and surface in painting, segregated from the “truth” of a polished surface in steel.

Like a culture that only listens to its own voices and only views its own images and only dances its own steps to its own music, the “culture” of artists is pushed in to a state of irrelevant insularity by Modernism. This insularity sometimes denies being elitist while its vocabulary, form, and context deny any requests for what is chided as “easy” understanding.

Duke & Battersby write sarcastically of this type of attitude that *Artworks should be “challenging” for the viewer (not to be misunderstood as challenging for the artist to make, a challenge that could result in dreaded virtuosity). Challenging here is to be understood as ugly, confusing and unnecessarily long.*

*(Teaching Secret Philosophy, <http://www.dukeandbattersby.com/w-philosophy.html>).*

The effect on public engagement is predictable and eloquently described by Duke & Battersby:

*People—even non-art initiated people—get it: it’s art if you say it’s art. But the truth is, you can make it art, but you can’t make them care about it. And that’s been the net result of these movements. People outside the art world no longer care about art. They listened when we said “Hey public, we don’t care what you think! This is about me, The Artist, and what I’m doing to further the discourse of Art!” And the public said “Yuh-huh,” and turned back to their moving, well-crafted, comic tv shows.*

*(Teaching Secret Philosophy).*

Jencks points to the same sin in Modernist architecture – namely that it did not communicate effectively with its ultimate users and did not make effective links with the city and history, falling in to the comfortable clutches of elitism and exclusivist arrogance.

*(pg 29, What is Post-Modernism?)*

A materially pure painter pursuing the essence of his language would never allow his work to be polluted by the flashing robot colors of a functional liquid-crystal-display screen. His concern (likely executed in masculine expressionist trowel-work) is with pigment dis-

persed through a binder on a textured surface. He would, in fact, be furious if his grand work today shared the same wall as a flat-screen television. For him, Art is to be limited to galleries and homes that look like galleries. Sadly, this is the reality of a Modernist philosophy of Art rooted in a democratic avant-garde that hoped to spread art to the public by attacking the white cube formerly known as a gallery.

Richard Shusterman, in an interview for Suzi Gablik's *Conversations before the end of time*, links this elitist segregation to aesthetic autonomy:

*To pass beyond the modern framework, it seems as if we must be willing to surrender the ideology of aesthetic autonomy--the compartmental conception of fine art that segregates it to the separate realm of the museum. Art, life and popular culture have all suffered from these entrenched divisions and from the consequently narrow identification of art with elitist fine art.*

(Suzi Gablik, *Conversations before the end of time*, London: Thames and Hudson 1995, pp. 247-65)

## Sandwiches & Interdisciplinary Work

For Duke & Battersby, the escape from this rigid segregation and autonomous alienation is found in interdisciplinary work. Their essay *Teaching Secret Philosophy* drafts this doorway as a smorgasbord of discourse. This image dovetails neatly with Jencks' pocket-able definitions of the post-modern-hyphen-meaning-hybrid. (pg.16, *What is Post-Modernism?*) Post-Modern architecture may borrow from many different traditions at once. In mixing lettuce & tomato & mayo & beef & whatever else in to infinite varieties of sandwiches contextualized by two slices of bread (the contemporary context in this force-fed & stuffed analogy), post-modern architecture addresses the past rather than eradicating it because of bad associations. Avoiding the simple gestures of revivalism, it re-employs the past by re-contextualizing it in the present. For Jencks, this is a critique of ultimate authority. He calls it *double coding*.

# Civilization is also a Sandwich!

To communicate with a culture multinational and migrant in nature, not-completely-like-but-awkwardly-analogous-to a BLT sandwich, which is itself quickly compressing and mixing in to a glorious stew with grilled-cheese-broccoli subs and Nutella-banana wraps, art must also diversify. It must speak to both society at large and to a very specialized discipline. (pg 30, *What is Post-Modernism?*) In *Teaching Secret Philosophy*, Duke & Battersby call these two groups *non-art-initiated people* and *art school people*, respectively, and echo Jencks' call for the arts to speak to both.

Again, Post-Modernism always carries the injunction to cross territories, break down modernist specialization, hybridize discourses, attack false boundaries. (pg 32, *What is Post-Modernism?*)

Clement Greenberg derided this “democratization” of art, re-enforced by cries from Walter Bannard that Post-Modernism was “inclusive,” “horizontally structured,” and consistently “aiming for the popular.” (pg 27, *What is Post-Modernism?*).



## THE INTERNET

TECHNOLOGY HAS TURNED INFORMATION IN TO A COMMODITY, and this newly minted item is at the fingertips of what Jencks calls the *cognitariat*, a new para class whose work is to create and distribute information. Earth is being compressed spatially in to a model global village agile enough to skip from a satellite to a mobile phone. As access to the internet increases, the potential for micro finance, Etsy sales, and a host of opportunities to spread wealth and intellectual capital will unfold in the pattern of emerging properties through an ecosystem. Where would the arts find themselves in this fractured network if they maintained an exclusive appearance schedule at traditional galleries, stages, and performance halls? What if they largely refuse the internet as a context? To stay put in traditional contexts, to refuse integration in to an increasingly global network that is by nature democratic, is a stubborn inflation beyond the posture of a painter who refuses to have their work matched to a living room sofa. The risk is no longer simply that the Arts may withdraw, but that they may **be withdrawn** by stagnation, as the world seems to be packing up and moving.

Jencks is phenomenally potent in his implied point that the post-modern arts have a tremendous capacity, through double coding, to pull people from far-divided educational and cultural backgrounds in to an aesthetic experience together. The relevance of this potential drastically increases in an information age where education and culture can divide people along economic lines. Wars begin when free-market capitalism and democracy allow cultural and ideological differences to translate in to economic divides.



Eva Sutton,  
"Hybrid" 2000

(I owe this model to Amy Chuai's book World on Fire)

If the arts, double coded with access points for people on both sides of such a widening divide, could produce an open-access game, is it possible that tensions could be given a pause to breathe and reflect? What if this game pulled all participants in to a Dionysian frenzy of ecstatic **Joy**? Could this **Joy** be **unity**? Could this **unity** translate in to a “real existence” outside of the game called art? If everything is tied to a game constructed by language, and the game of art (an extension pack?) serves to shuffle out neologisms, could these new games, sprung from an imaginative art-game, exist on their own once the ecstasy of aesthetic experience had passed? If new games birthed from the same art-game-mother could survive on their own like one of Eva Sutton's hybrid species trying its luck in the rain forest, would they display commonalities between divided people?

## CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN-ADVENTURE

## META-NARRATIVES

Embracing plurality and incongruity, post-modern art would have a difficult time justifying the presence of some absolute principle of peace at the center of every game board. But what if art's purpose was to place questions throughout its games? What if these questions were accessible to many people, and the dialogue across boundaries sparked by the questions was a meta-game? (Like a meta-narrative-turned-choose-your-own-adventure-book). Could the process of playing this game freely be synonymous with the process of not being violent? If *Beauty Plus Pity* can get vegetarians to talk to hunters on East Ave by making a caricature of both of them and double-coding for multiple points of access and mixed messages, could newly hybrid pieces of art speak questions across more violent cultural divides? If the arts can do this, why would they stay in a gallery or a theatre hall? Why would they bother tearing down the gallery or the theatre hall?

Some people in Upstate New York think that it is awkward to live with their parents after they get married at the age of thirty. Should art stay home because it is afraid of things like the internet?