

'The notion that nothing new can be made is a fundamental aspect to Postmodern art.' (Sturken and Cartwright). Consider this in terms of two Postmodern images.

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Sturken and Cartwright's notion of nothing new being a fundamental aspect in postmodern art is itself gleaned from other sources, starting perhaps with Jean Baudrillard's concept of the map. Baudrillard, a French philosopher, opens *Simulacra and Simulation* detailing how thoughts on the concept of the map now precede the idea or the real, so therefore any reference to the territory designated by the map is in reality a primary reference to the map, "The territory no longer precedes the map" and "it is a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, j. 1994, p1).

In chapter eight of Sturken and Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* (second edition) the writers relay this simply in terms of writing "we lost sight of 'the real'. Our confidence in referents declined as we came to see the simulation as taking the place of the real" (2009, p308). Sturken and Cartwright explain this in many ways including here in terms of identity in postmodernity and particularly refer to the reflexivity in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* works. "She struck poses evoking actresses in film stills" (2009, p 322). These images in particular will be the focus of this essay along with others as a pivot point to the consideration of this aspect of postmodern art, along with showing that Sturken and Cartwright themselves refer back to other texts, notably Baudrillard's works, using both overt quotes and more subtle interpretations.

Postmodernism is a reaction to modernism, to that that went before it like many art movements. With modernism came a sense of progress through rational knowledge and scientific advancement. This progress or advancement in modernism continued into the world of art with a variety of artists embracing, theorising and also rejecting the notions of progress. Where modernism embraced grand narratives and a cold detached formalism that in photography is seen as outside the from or above the frame, something less about the subject and more about the composition. Modernism believes in a rational, functional society, organised and categorised, the new is inherent in the modernist sense of discovery, progress and technology. It also takes ideas from the enlightenment about the self, such as a universal, stable, coherent and rational self.

As modernism came to an end, if it ever completely did, people considered what might come after it, how could something come after, had modernism not been the progressive force it was thought to be? Suzi Gablik, an American artist and art critic, argues:

Modernism—the term that has been used to describe art and culture of the past hundred years—appears to be coming to an end. As we live through unsettling moral and intellectual consequences of what the American critic Irving Howe has called the ‘decline of the new,’ it has become harder and harder to believe in the possibility of yet another stylistic breakthrough, yet another leap into radical form... As long as we are willing to consider *anything* as art, innovation no longer seems possible, or even desirable. (1984. p11)

As the text suggests Gablik is not alone in this assertion with Irving Howe also suggesting something similar. The notion of the end of art is nothing new itself and even forms the title of a book by Arthur Danto, an American philosopher, where the writer suggests that art is no longer about the object, the painting or sculpture but what the critic, or audience understands from what the artist is presenting to them.

From this point of view then the notion of nothing new is completely fundamental to postmodern art, without the reference to something gone before, either some other cultural capital, social or personal experience, the viewer has no way to understand the photograph, the text itself becomes meaningless.



Fig 1. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 1978

Using Cindy Sherman, *Untitled* 1978 as a starting point Sturken and Cartwright outline how Sherman's *Untitled* series are meant to “evoke the style or a particular moment or genre, such as the Hollywood female star” (2009, p322). It does not however reference anything that may be tangible from the era of the 1940's and 50 stills produced by Hollywood to promote

new films they are “imitations or simulations or a type” (2009, p322) and refer to a style, a signifier, a simulation itself. Baudrillard may term these images as definite examples of simulacra.

It is interesting that Sturken and Cartwright use the Cindy Sherman example in their work because of the reference to the film industry and *evoking* a sense of something

from the past. There is a chapter in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* that refers directly back to cinema.

In the "real" as in cinema, there was history but there isn't anymore. Today, the history that is "given back" to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a "historical real" than neofiguration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real. Neofiguration is an *invocation* or resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: hyperreal. (1994, p 45)

Baudrillard may use unfamiliar language but the original idea that Sturken and Cartwright produce in their explanation of Cindy Sherman's reference to a fiction from the past seems clear. Sherman's *Untitled* images, when seen together, depict a definite range of female characters from cinema's Hollywood Studio era. It seems that here is where the reflectivity of the work comes into play. Not only is Sherman characterising a stereotype from the era but by placing herself in the frame, as the model portraying the actress from the film that never was, which is itself pure simulacra, she is also bringing the viewers attention to identity and gender, acts of looking and the position of the gaze. Sherman is in many ways presenting something new with a visual feminist critique of film, photography and society. Laura Mulvey, a British film theorist, had introduced the term "male gaze" in 1975 to refer broadly to the differences between what were considered typical representation in cinema of the active looking of the man and a passive representation of women.

Sherman brings to the viewer the knowledge and understanding of this bias by taking a previous notion, re-enacting an old style and stereotype to draw the viewer into the critical context and then presents something new by placing herself as both the viewer and the viewed, both in front of the camera as model and behind the camera as producer. In this manner Sherman now asks her audience to look again from inside the frame, or inside the culture of what was not yet recognised as the postmodern and not from above or outside the frame as the modernist may have done in its cold detached formalist manner.

There is a sense in many texts on postmodern art that there was previously an over emphasis on newness in modernism, in order to move away from these notions then the

sense that a copy has less value than an original must dissipate. This however is not entirely accurate because although postmodern art on the one hand rejects the ideas of modernism and modernist values of grand meta narratives it also uses modern and contemporary art as a fundamental reference for irony, pastiche, copy and nostalgia as a means to engage the viewer into the means of production which is also an aspect of modern art. This is perhaps how the two forms managed to remain concurrent at the same point in time.

Postmodernist art also has a tendency to remake images and painting, and other art from the past too. There are many reasons for this, including humour, irony, pastiche or as Jeff Wall described in an interview with *The Guardian*, a British newspaper, it “gives a certain freedom” (Sean O’Hagan, 2015). Wall here is referring to his more recent works that are recreations of things he has seen but did not photograph, instead choosing to interpret and interrogate his own memory. This is both a break from his earlier works as well as a continuation from them. One of Wall’s first exhibited works is *The Destroyed Room* which like many that followed is a re-encounter, re-imagining or re-staging of another work of art or visualising a scene from literature. Wall seems to use this technique to make visible a social or political point.

Picture for Women is in many ways similar in nature to the *Untitled* works of Cindy Sherman. Indeed both photographers are making a statement about both the past and the present. *Picture for Women* is a response to *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882), a painting by Manet just as Sherman’s work is response to the film industry of Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s.



Fig 2. *Picture for Women*, 1979

To understand the picture the viewer first needs to know something of the past, something from a past artistic movement, how society was seen and organised and, of course, of the now, of contemporary society. The photograph is a critique of its contemporary culture or perhaps recent history but without the reference to earlier art works, like many of Wall’s imagines, it may not work. Without that that came before it,

Un bar aux Folies Bergère, the viewer has only a fuzzy point of reference and the signs may ultimately be misunderstood.

The contemporary nature of *Picture for Women* is the issue of relationships, as Sherman was highlighting between the active, supposed male produced and passive female typified by the modernist and those that went before them. Wall's work also has another dimension to it in the manner in which he exhibits. Using transparent images and back-lighting them in a lightbox Wall evokes ideas of contemporary advertising. Again using something that has gone before, something that is ubiquitous in popular culture and mass media to give a sense of knowledge and familiarity to the viewer and later in time perhaps a sense of nostalgia.

Digital processes are also an important issue, especially in relation to Jeff Wall. The example Sturken and Cartwright use by Wall is *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* which is a complicated digital image made of "more than a hundred shots" (2009, p 332). The image itself is described here simply as a remake of a woodcut print by Katsushika Hokusai that is "an early representation of movement" (2009, p 331). In both representations the characters in the narrative are responding to a gust of wind as the title suggests, and trying to capture some papers that have been blown away by the wind. Wall swaps the background of the original Mount Fuji for modern rather drab industrial landscape. It may be easy to suggest that with Wall using so many negative images or raw files that the scene does not exist in reality, nor did it ever, it is in reality only something like an approximation, a simulation based on a fiction. The true 'image' that even this photograph may have come from is only in Wall's mind and could therefore be considered as something new, however, it is clearly based on something that has gone before it, this is certainly a fundamental aspect of it.

There are of course many dichotomies with Wall's works, not least of all *Picture for Women*, even in relation to other art, which David Campany, a British writer, eloquently states in his article '*A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom: Jeff Wall's Picture for Women*, many of which are beyond the scope of this essay. However, a notable section regarding how "*Picture for Women* is nearly always accompanied by a thumbnail of the Manet painting" (2007, p 12). The text from a major retrospective at Tate Modern on Jeff Wall included writing about the Manet painting in order to frame and give context to *Picture for Women*. The text referred to here and quoted by Campany in his essay

states that "Wall borrows the internal structure of the painting", (2007, p 12) so even here it seems that a reference to something else is fundamentally required in order to understand, frame and give the new its context. The text continues regarding the signifiers in the paintings and how "Wall updates the theme by positioning the camera at the centre of the work" (Campany, 2007, p 13) adding yet another layer of referencing. It is however very difficult to see the image at times when considering it as a reflection, there are no immediate and obvious details to show the image is in fact partly a reflection in a large mirror. This seems to add to the image its sense of an echo, of a definite something that has gone before it.

As research has progressed it seems clear that modernism tried to push the form of photography to its limits to explore the nature of form and frame, composition and style of the image to such the extent that there was nowhere left for photography to go. Perhaps Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Baltic Sea* is as Rothko's *Untitled*, the ultimate form in art, nothing. Perhaps this is where the notion of nothing new comes from. Other arguments are more prevalent, particularly in this essay that photography has now been in existence for so long that every aspect of artistic value within the medium has been explored already, leading to the consideration that nothing new can come about. This notion seems in many ways to bare out, though in many others it too does not. It is however worth noting and remembering the difference between the notion that nothing new can be made is a fundamental aspect of postmodern art and the idea that postmodern art cannot produce something new. It seems clear that postmodern art can create something new by not only interrogating the past. However, the images and ideas from the past are not the only way forward to creating something new but in terms of advancing social and philosophical understanding and aim are a powerful way to ask people, not just the artistic and creative industries, to re-examine, re-evaluate and challenge once more our ideas about the world around us. Is postmodern art asking us if the notions we currently hold about our society, about the world, about our art, are in fact based on sound and serious understandings or are we simply expressing something that is part of a fashion, a brief moment in time that can and should be considered and reconsidered in future as an endless repetition of evaluation and analysis?

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