

Naomi Even-Aberle

9/9/2017 | VCFA - 2nd Semester | Mailing #1

Joselit, David. *American Art Since 1945*. London, Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Chapter 4: Objects, General and Specific: Assemblage, Minimalism, Fluxus

American Art Since 1945 chapter 4: *Objects, General and Specific: Assemblage, Minimalism and Fluxus* follows a conceptual map of artmaking in Post-war America, providing readers with a diverse survey of the ideologies, approaches and aesthetics within the field of art starting from 1945. Author David Joselit focuses his critiques and interpretations on artists who contributed distinct strategies and tendencies within their work; selecting both artists who fit within a specific canon of art history, and those that do not.

Joselit starts out by defining post-war Assemblage art as art that focuses on the exploration of objectivity. With the end of World War II, the decade and a half afterwards saw a rise in commodity and became a consumer society. Assemblage artists like Jasper Johns, Edward Kienholz, Bruce Conner, and Robert Rauschenberg explored how ready-made and assemblage art could reformulate the context of the mass-produced object within the institution of art. This examination provided a freedom for material exploration within the commercial culture; a freedom that allowed these artists to play with the relationship between form and function as well as intent and ideology of the materials and objects utilized.

Jasper Johns in his painting *Device (1961-62)*, plays with the role and interpretation of an object; in this case a ruler, as an image, a tool, and a text. Demonstrating how an object is seen, how it is used, and how it is labeled and interpreted is not a fixed context and can and will change over time and through varied presentations of the object. Johns viewed consumer society as a set of commodities that functioned as elements in a shared language, and playing with and recontextualizing the objects' meaning allowed artists to question the very consumer society they were engaging with to create their work. Generally, Assemblage artists utilized discarded commodities and through the reuse and re-coding of these objects, they created new relationships outside those initiated from within the very consumer society they originated.

While some artists were reassigning an alternative context to objects, other artists associated with Minimalism were stripping down objects to provide a neutral perception and a defamiliarization of the object, its value, function, and ideology. Theorist Susan Sontag advocated for critiquing art on what the object was doing, not what it was saying and cutting back on context to help re-educate society on the basis of perception.

Artists like Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd utilized industrial materials that already had a somewhat neutral vocabulary in the institution of art, to force the viewer to give the simplified objects meaning and to confront their own perceptions. Initiating the act of seeing as an act of doing, and as a tool to unveil how much the consumer society was dictating perception, their goal was to demonstrate the intimate and complex relationship between viewers, space, and the objects themselves.

In Judd's *Untitled (1966)* sculpture, he explored this complex relationship between the object and the viewer. The sculpture is a parallelepiped composed of both reflective and translucent industrial materials; and as the viewer changes positions in relation to the object, the surface quality of the material causes the object to disappear and reappear. The viewability of the art was directly dependent upon the viewers' position and perception in relation to the work. Judd orchestrated a sculptural encounter between the viewers and the objects, which was meant to ground both the optical and psychological mechanisms of perception.

Joselit concludes the chapter with a view of the Fluxus movement. He defines Fluxus as "a playful and sometimes absurd interactive mode of art making based on events and everyday movements and actions." Between performance and sculpture, the Fluxus events utilized a limited number of actions, which were simple and directly related to everyday life. Sometimes these events would become so blurred that one's everyday life, could/should be considered "Art."

Artists like Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and George Brecht (and John Cage!!) simultaneously introduce chance operations and content of the everyday life into art; ritualising the simplest actions, drawing attention to the most ordinary things and removed sensory perceptions through a Zen Buddhist and mindfulness approach to art making.

Artists like Yoko Ono explored the place of commodities in the world through her piece *Self-Portrait*; a Fluxus object consisting of a small mirror placed inside an envelope on which the title of the work and the artist's name appeared. Accepting and using the same consumer marketing trends to spread her work, Ono's piece collapsed the idea of a formal portraiture in exchange for challenging the mechanism and tedium which underlined the choices of consumer society.

Representing a spectrum of practices, artists, and ideologies from Assemblage, Minimalism and Fluxus works, these artists responded in various ways to the growing focus on consumer culture and the commodity, its developed public language and its influence on public perception. These

explorations and strategies paved the way for other artists to explore new technologies, information networks, and the body as a vehicle for messaging.