# Why Art Became Ugly

## Stephen R. C. Hicks

For a long time critics of modern and postmodern art have relied on the "*Isn't that disgusting*" strategy. By that I mean the strategy of pointing out that given works of art are ugly, trivial, or in bad taste, that "a five-year-old could have made them," and so on. And they have mostly left it at that. The points have often been true, but they have also been tiresome and unconvincing—and the high-art world has been entirely unmoved.

Of course, the major works of the twentieth-century art world are ugly. Of course, many are offensive. Of course, a five-year old could in many cases have made an indistinguishable product. Those points are not arguable—and they are entirely beside the main question. The important question is: Why has the high-art world of the twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries adopted the ugly and the offensive? Why has it poured its creative energies and cleverness into the trivial, the mocking, and the self-proclaimedly meaningless?

It is easy to point out the psychologically disturbed or cynical players who learn to manipulate the system to get their fifteen minutes or a nice big check from a foundation, or the hangers-on who play the game in order to get invited to the right parties. But *every* human field of endeavor has its hangers-on, its disturbed and cynical members, and they are never the ones who drive the scene. The question is: Why did cynicism and ugliness come to be the game you had to play to make it in the world of art?

The flipside of that question is why representational art became a non-player. Why was it dismissed by high art establishment and driven underground for much of the twentieth century? Why did cutting edge decide to abandon representation, especially representations of the positive, the healthy, the romantic, or the optimistic?

My first theme will be that the modern and postmodern art world was and is nested within a broader intellectual and cultural framework generated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite occasional invocations of "Art for art's sake" and attempts to withdraw from life, art has always been significant, probing the same issues about the human condition that all forms of cultural life probe. Artists are thinking and feeling human beings, and they think and feel intensely about the same important things that all intelligent and passionate humans do. Even when some artists claim that their work has no significance or reference or meaning, those claims are always significant, referential, and meaningful claims. What counts as a significant cultural claim, however, depends on what is going on in the broader intellectual and cultural framework. The world of art is not hermetically sealed—its themes can have an internal developmental logic, but those themes are almost never generated from within the world of art.

My second theme will be that, come the latter part of the twentieth century and the death of modernism, postmodern art does not represent much of a break with modernism. Despite the variations that postmodernism represents, the postmodern art world has never challenged fundamentally the framework that modernism adopted at the end of the nineteenth century. There is more fundamental continuity between them than discontinuity. Postmodernism has simply become an

increasingly narrow set of variations upon a narrow modernist set of themes. To see this, let us rehearse the main lines of development.

#### Modernism's Themes

By now the main themes of modern art are clear to us. Standard histories of art tell us that modern art died around 1970, its themes and strategies exhausted, and that we now have more than four decades of postmodernism behind us.

The big break with the past occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century. Until the end of the nineteenth century, art was a vehicle of sensuousness, meaning, and passion. Its goals were the significant, originality, beauty, the sublime. The artist was a skilled master of his craft. Such masters were able to create original representations with human significance and universal appeal. Combining vision and skill, artists were exalted beings capable of creating objects that in turn had an awesome power to exalt the senses, the intellects, and the passions of those who experience them.

The break with that tradition came when the first modernists of the late 1800s set themselves systematically to the project of isolating all the elements of art and eliminating them or flying in the face of them.

The causes of the break were many. The increasing naturalism of the nineteenth century led, for those who felt strongly their religious heritage, to feeling desperately alone and without guidance in a vast, empty universe. The rise of philosophical theories of skepticism and irrationalism led many to distrust their cognitive faculties of perception and reason. The development of scientific theories of evolution and entropy brought with them pessimistic accounts of human nature and the destiny of the world. The spread of liberalism and free markets caused their opponents on the political left, many of whom were members of the artistic *avant garde*, to see political developments as a series of deep disappointments. And the technological revolutions spurred by the combination of science and capitalism led many to project a future in which mankind would be dehumanized or destroyed by the very machines that were supposed to improve its lot.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century intellectual world's sense of disquiet had become a full-blown anxiety. The artists responded, exploring in their works the implications of a world in which reason, dignity, optimism, and beauty seemed to have disappeared.

The new theme was: Art must be a quest for truth, however brutal, and not a quest for beauty. So the question became: What is the truth of art?

The first major claim of modernism is a content claim: a demand that we recognize the truth that the world is not beautiful. The world is fractured, decaying, horrifying, depressing, empty, and ultimately unintelligible.

That claim by itself is not uniquely modernist, though the number of artists who signed onto that claim is uniquely modernist. Some past artists had believed the world to be ugly and horrible—but they had used the traditional realistic forms of perspective and color to say this. The innovation of the early modernists was to assert that *form must match content*. Art should *not* use the traditional realistic forms of perspective and color because those forms presuppose an orderly, integrated, and knowable reality.

Edvard Munch got there first (*The Scream*, 1893): If the truth is that reality is a horrifying, disintegrating swirl, then *both* form and content should express the feeling. Pablo Picasso got there second (*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907): If the truth is that

reality is fractured and empty, then both form and content must express that. Salvador Dali's surrealist paintings go a step further: If the truth is that reality is unintelligible, then art can teach this lesson by using realistic forms *against* the idea that we can distinguish objective reality from irrational, subjective dreams.

The second and parallel development within modernism is *Reductionism*. If we are uncomfortable with the idea that art or any discipline can tell us the truth about external, objective reality, then we will retreat from any sort of content and focus solely on art's uniqueness. And if we are concerned with what is unique in art, then each artistic medium is different. For example, what distinguishes painting from literature? Literature tells stories—so painting should not pretend to be literature; instead it should focus on its own uniqueness. The truth about painting is that it is a two-dimensional surface with paint on it. So instead of telling stories, the reductionist movement in painting asserts, to find the truth of painting painters must deliberately eliminate whatever can be eliminated from painting and see what survives. Then we will know the essence of painting.

Since we are eliminating, in the following iconic pieces from the twentieth century world of art, it is often not what is on the canvas that counts—it is what is *not* there. What is significant is what has been eliminated and is now absent. Art comes to be about *absence*.

Many elimination strategies were pursued by the early reductionists. If traditionally painting was cognitively significant in that it told us something about external reality, then the first thing we should try to eliminate is content based on an alleged awareness of reality. Dali's *Metamorphosis* here does double-duty. Dali challenges the idea that what we call reality is anything more than a bizarre subjective psychological state. Picasso's *Desmoiselles* also does double-duty: If the eyes are the window to the soul, then these souls are frighteningly vacant. Or if we turn the focus the other way and say that our eyes are our access to the world, then Picasso's women are seeing nothing.

So we eliminate from art a cognitive connection to an external reality. What else can be eliminated? If traditionally, skill in painting is a matter of representing a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface, then to be true to painting we must eliminate the pretense of a third dimension. Sculpture is three-dimensional, but painting is not sculpture. The truth of painting is that it is *not* three-dimensional. For example, Barnett Newman's *Dionysius* (1949)—consisting of a green background with two thin, horizontal lines, one yellow and one red—is representative of this line of development. It is paint on canvas and *only* paint on canvas.

But traditional paints have a texture, often leading to a three-dimensional effect if one looks closely. So, as Morris Louis demonstrates in *Alpha-Phi* (1961), we can get closer to painting's two-dimensional essence by thinning down the paints so that there is no texture. We are now as two-dimensional as possible, and that is the end of this reductionist strategy—the third dimension is gone.

On the other hand, if painting is two-dimensional, then perhaps we can still be true to painting if we paint things that themselves are two-dimensional. For example, Jasper Johns's *White Flag* (1955–58) is a painted-over American flag, and Roy Lichtenstein's *Drowning Girl* (1963), *Whaam!* (1963), and others are over-sized comicbook panels blown up onto large canvases. But flags and comic books are themselves two-dimensional objects, so a two-dimensional painting of them retains their essential truth while letting us remain true to the theme of painting's two-dimensionality. This device is particularly clever because, while remaining two-

dimensional, we can at the same time smuggle in some illicit content—content that earlier had been eliminated.

But of course that really is cheating, as Lichtenstein went on to point out humorously with his *Brushstroke* (1965). If painting is the act of making brushstrokes on canvas, then to be true to the act of painting the product should look like what it is: a brushstroke on canvas. And with that little joke, this line of development is over.

So far in our quest for the truth of painting, we have tried only tried eliminating content and playing with the gap between three-dimensional and two-dimensional. What about composition and color differentiation? Can we eliminate those?

If, traditionally, skill in painting requires a mastery of composition, then, as Jackson Pollock's pieces famously illustrate, we can eliminate careful composition for randomness. Or if, traditionally, skill in painting is a mastery of color range and color differentiation, then we can eliminate color differentiation. Early in the twentieth century, Kasimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918) was a whitish square painted on a white background. Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* (1960–66) brought this line of development to a close by showing a very, very black cross painted on a very, very, very black background.

Or if traditionally the art object is a special and unique artifact, then we can eliminate the art object's special status by making art works that are reproductions of excruciatingly ordinary objects. Andy Warhol's paintings of soup cans and reproductions of tomato juice cartons have just that result. Or in a variation on that theme and sneaking in some cultural criticism, we can show that what art and capitalism do is take objects that are in fact special and unique—such as Marilyn Monroe—and reduce them to two-dimensional mass-produced commodities. Warhol's 1962 diptych of Marilyn Monroe, for example, repeats images of her head dozens of times; the left side shows twenty-five minor variations in garish color, and the right side shows another twenty-five in progressively fading black and white.

Or if art traditionally is sensuous and perceptually embodied, then we can eliminate the sensuous and perceptual altogether, as in conceptual art. Consider Joseph Kosuth's *It was It*, *Number 4*. Kosuth first created a background of type-set text that reads:

Observation of the conditions under which misreadings occur gives rise to a doubt which I should not like to leave unmentioned, because it can, I think, become the starting-point for a fruitful investigation. Everyone knows how frequently the reader finds that in *reading aloud* his attention wanders from the text and turns to his own thoughts. As a result of this digression on the part of his attention he is often unable, if interrupted and questioned, to give any account of what he has read. He has read, as it were, automatically, but not correctly.

He then overlaid the black text with the following words in blue neon:

Description of the same content twice.

#### It was it.

Here the perceptual appeal is minimal, and art becomes a purely conceptual enterprise— and we have eliminated painting altogether.

My point is not that in the above works I've mentioned that eliminationism is the only thing going on. Sometimes it is, and sometimes of course artists make more than one point in a painting. But elimination and reduction is a key line of development in modernist painting. And if we put all of the above reductionist strategies together, the course of modern painting has been to eliminate the third dimension, composition, color, perceptual content, and the sense of the art object as something special.

This inevitably leads us back to Marcel Duchamp, the grand-daddy of modernism who saw the end of the road decades earlier. With his *Fountain* (1917), Duchamp made the quintessential statement about the history and future of art. Duchamp of course knew the history of art and, given recent trends, where art was going. He knew what had been achieved—how over the centuries art had been a powerful vehicle that called upon the highest development of the human creative vision and demanded exacting technical skill; and he knew that art had an awesome power to stimulate the senses, the minds, and the emotions of those who experience it. With his urinal, Duchamp offered presciently a summary statement. The artist is not a great creator—Duchamp went shopping at a plumbing store. The artwork is not a special object—it was mass-produced in a factory. The experience of art is not exciting and ennobling—it is puzzling and leaves one with a sense of distaste. But over and above that, Duchamp did not select just any ready-made object to display. He could have selected a sink or a door-knob. In selecting the urinal, his message was clear: Art is something you piss on.

But there is a still deeper point that Duchamp's urinal teaches us about the trajectory of modernism. In modernism, art becomes a *philosophical* enterprise rather than an *artistic* one. The driving purpose of modernism is not to *do* art but to *find out* what art is. We have eliminated X—is it still art? Now we have eliminated Y—is it still art? The point of the objects was not aesthetic experience; rather the works are symbols representing a stage in the evolution of a philosophical experiment. In most cases, the *discussions* about the works are much more interesting than the works themselves. That means that we keep the works in museums and archives and we look at them not for their own sake, but for the same reason scientists keep lab notes—as a record of their thinking at various stages. Or, to use a different analogy, the purpose of art objects is like that of road signs along the highway—not as objects of contemplation in their own right but as markers to tell us how far we have traveled down a given road.

This was Duchamp's point when he noted, contemptuously, that most critics had missed the point: "I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." The urinal is not art, and Duchamp did not think of it as one—it is a device used as part of an intellectual exercise in figuring out *why* it is *not* art.

Modernism had no answer to Duchamp's challenge, and by the 1960s it found it had reached a dead end. To the extent modern art had content, its pessimism led it to the conclusion that nothing was worth saying. To the extent that it played the reductive elimination game, it found that nothing uniquely artistic survived elimination. Art became nothing. In the 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg was often quoted as saying, "Artists are no better than filing clerks." And Andy Warhol found

his usual smirking way to announce the end when asked what he thought art was anymore: "Art? —Oh, that's a man's name."

### Postmodernism's Four Themes

Where could art go after death of modernism? Postmodernism did not go, and has not gone, far. It needed some content and some new forms, but it did not want to go back to classicism, romanticism, or traditional realism.

As it had at the end of the nineteenth century, the high-art world reached out and drew upon the broader intellectual and cultural context of the late 1960s and 1970s. It absorbed the trendiness of Existentialism's absurd universe, the failure of Positivism's reductionism, and the collapse of socialism's New Left. It connected to intellectual heavyweights such as Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, and it took its cue from their abstract themes of antirealism, deconstruction, and their heightened adversarial stance to Western culture. From those themes, postmodernism introduced four variations on modernism.

First, postmodernism re-introduced content—but only self-referential and ironic content. As with philosophical postmodernism, artistic postmodernism rejected any form of realism and became anti-realist. Art cannot be about reality or nature—because, according to postmodernism, "reality" and "nature" are merely social constructs. All we have are the social world and its social constructs, one of those constructs being the world of art. So, we may have content in our art as long as we talk self-referentially about the social world of art.

Secondly, postmodernism set itself to a more ruthless deconstruction of traditional categories that the modernists had not fully eliminated. Modernism had been reductionist, but some artistic targets remained.

For example, stylistic integrity had always been an element of great art, and artistic purity was one motivating force within modernism. So, one postmodern strategy has been to mix styles eclectically in order to undercut the idea of stylistic integrity. An early postmodern example in architecture, for example, is Philip Johnson's AT&T (now Sony) building in Manhattan—a modern skyscraper that could also be a giant eighteenth-century Chippendale cabinet. The architectural firm of Foster & Partners designed the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation headquarters (1979–86)—a building that could also be the bridge of a ship, complete with mock anti-aircraft guns, should the bank ever need them. Friedensreich Hundertwasser's *House* (1986) in Vienna is more extreme—a deliberate slapping together of glass skyscraper, stucco, and occasional bricks, along with oddly placed balconies and arbitrarily sized windows, and completed with a Russian onion dome or two.

If we put the above two strategies together, then postmodern art will come to be both self-referential and destructive. It will be an internal commentary on the social history of art, but a subversive one. Here there is continuity from modernism. Picasso took one of Matisse's portraits of his daughter—and used it as a dartboard, encouraging his friends to do the same. Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) is a rendition of the Mona Lisa with a cartoonish beard and moustache added. Rauschenberg erased a de Kooning work with a heavy wax pencil. In the 1960s, a gang led by George Maciunas performed Philip Corner's Piano Activities (1962)—which called for a number of men with implements of destruction such as band saws and chisels to destroy a grand piano. Niki de Saint Phalle's Venus de Milo (1962) is a life-size plaster-on-chickenwire version of the classic beauty filled with bags of red and black paint; Saint Phalle then took a rifle and fired upon the Venus, puncturing the statue and the bags of paint to a splattered effect.

Saint Phalle's *Venus* links us to the third postmodern strategy. Postmodernism allows one to make content statements as long as they are about *social* reality and not about an alleged *natural* or *objective* reality and—here is the variation—as long as they are *narrower* race/class/sex statements rather than pretentious, universalist claims about something called The Human Condition. Postmodernism rejects a universal human nature and substitutes the claim that we are all constructed into competing groups by our racial, economic, ethnic, and sexual circumstances. Applied to art, this postmodern claim implies that there are no artists, only *hyphenated artists*: black-artists, woman-artists, gay-artists, poor-Hispanic-artists, and so on.

Conceptual artist Frederic's *PMS* piece from the 1990s is helpful here in providing a schema. The piece is textual, a black canvas with the following words in red:

## WHAT CREATES P.M.S. IN WOMEN?

Power Money

Sex

Let us start with Power and consider race. Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* (1985–86) is an appropriately powerful piece about white power. Alexander places three South African whites on a bench. Their skin is ghostly or corpse-like white, and she gives them monster heads and heart-surgery scars suggesting their heartlessness. But all three of them are sitting casually on the bench—they could be waiting for a bus or watching the passers-by at a mall. Her theme is the banality of evil: Whites don't even recognize themselves for the monsters they are.

Now for Money. There is the long-standing rule in modern art that one should never say anything kind about capitalism. From Andy Warhol's criticisms of mass-produced capitalist culture we can move easily to Jenny Holzer's *Private Property Created Crime* (1982). In the center of world capitalism—New York's Times Square—Holzer combines conceptualism with social commentary in an ironically clever manner by using capitalism's own media to subvert it. German artist Hans Haacke's *Freedom is now simply going to be sponsored—out of petty cash* (1991) is another monumental example. While the rest of the world was celebrating the end of brutality behind the Iron Curtain, Haacke erected a huge Mercedes-Benz logo atop a former East German guard tower. Men with guns previously occupied that tower—but Haacke suggests that all we are doing is replacing the rule of the Soviets with the equally heartless rule of the corporations.

Now for Sex. Saint Phalle's *Venus* can do double-duty here. We can interpret the rifle that shoots into the Venus as a phallic tool of dominance, in which case Saint-Phalle's piece can be seen as a feminist protest of the male destruction of femininity. Mainstream feminist art includes Barbara Kruger's posters and room-size exhibits in bold black and red with angry faces yelling politically-correct slogans about female victimization—art as a poster at a political rally. Jenny Saville's *Branded* (1992) is a grotesque self-portrait: Against any conception of female beauty, Saville asserts that she will be distended and hideous—and shove it in your face.

The fourth and final postmodern variation on modernism is a more ruthless nihilism. The above-mentioned works, while focused on the negative, are still dealing with important themes of power, wealth, and justice toward women. How can we eliminate more thoroughly any positivity in art? As relentlessly negative as modern art has been, what has not been done?

Entrails and blood: An art exhibition in 2000 asked patrons to place a goldfish in a blender and then turn the blender on—art as life reduced to indiscriminate liquid entrails. Marc Quinn's *Self* (1991) is the artist's own blood collected over the course of several months and molded into a frozen cast of his head. That is reductionism with a vengeance.

Unusual sex: Alternate sexualities and fetishes have been pretty much worked over during the twentieth century. But until recently art has not explored sex involving children. Eric Fischl's Sleepwalker (1979) shows a pubescent boy masturbating while standing naked in a kiddie pool in the backyard. Fischl's Bad Boy (1981) shows a boy stealing from his mother's purse and looking at his naked mother who is sleeping with her legs sprawled. If we have read our Freud, however, perhaps this is not very shocking. So we move on to Paul McCarthy's Cultural Gothic (1992–93) and the theme of bestiality. In this life-size, moving exhibit, a young boy stands behind a goat that he is violating. Here we have more than child sexuality and sex with animals, however: McCarthy adds some cultural commentary by having the boy's father present and resting his hands paternally on the boy's shoulders while the boy thrusts away.

A preoccupation with urine and feces: Again, postmodernism continues a longstanding modernist tradition. After Duchamp's urinal, Kunst ist Scheisse ("Art is shit") became, fittingly, the motto of the Dada movement. In the 1960s Piero Manzoni canned, labeled, exhibited and sold ninety tins of his own excrement (in 2002, a British museum purchased can number 68 for about \$40,000). Andres Serrano generated controversy in the 1980s with his Piss Christ, a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine. In the 1990s Chris Ofili's The Holy Virgin Mary (1996) portrayed the Madonna as surrounded by disembodied genitalia and chunks of dried feces. In 2000 Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi paid homage to their master, Marcel Duchamp. Fountain is now at the Tate Museum in London, and during regular museum hours Yuan and Jian unzipped and proceeded to urinate on Duchamp's urinal. (The museum's directors were not pleased, but Duchamp would be proud of his spiritual children.) And there is G. G. Allin, the self-proclaimed performance artist who achieved his fifteen minutes by defecating on stage and flinging his feces into the audience.

So again we have reached a dead end: From Duchamp's *Piss on art* at the beginning of the century to Allin's *Shit on you* at the end—that is not a significant development over the course of a century.

#### The Future of Art

The heyday of postmodernism in art was the 1980s and 90s. Modernism had become stale by the 1970s, and I suggest that postmodernism has reached a similar dead-end, a *What next?* stage. Postmodern art was a game that played out within a narrow range of assumptions, and we are weary of the same old, same old, with only minor variations. The gross-outs have become mechanical and repetitive, and they no longer gross us out.

So, what next?

It is helpful to remember that modernism in art came out of a very specific intellectual culture of the late nineteenth century, and that it has remained loyally stuck in those themes. But those are not the only themes open to artists, and much has happened since the end of the nineteenth century.

We would not know from the world of modern art that average life expectancy has doubled since Edvard Munch screamed. We would not know that diseases that

routinely killed hundreds of thousands of newborns each year have been eliminated. Nor would we know anything about the rising standards of living, the spread of democratic liberalism, and emerging markets.

We are brutally aware of the horrible disasters of National Socialism and international Communism, and art has a role in keeping us aware of them. But we would never know from the world of art the equally important fact that those battles were won and brutality was defeated.

And entering even more exotic territory, if we knew only the contemporary art world we would never get a glimmer of the excitement in evolutionary psychology, Big Bang cosmology, genetic engineering, the beauty of fractal mathematics—and the awesome fact that humans are the kind of being that can do all those exciting things.

Artists and the art world should be at the edge. The high-art world is now marginalized, in-bred, and conservative. It is being left behind, and for any self-respecting artist there should be nothing more demeaning than being left behind.

There are few more important cultural purposes than genuinely advancing art. We all intensely and personally know what art means to us. We surround ourselves with it. Art books and videos. Films at the theatre and streamed via the internet. Stereos at home, music on our MP3 players and in our cars. Novels at the beach and as bedtime reading. Trips to galleries and museums. Art on the walls of our living space—and the living space itself. We are each creating the artistic world we want to be in. From the art in our individual lives to the art that is cultural and national symbols, from the \$10 poster to the \$10 million painting acquired by a museum—we all have a major investment in art.

The world is ready for the bold new artistic move. That can come only from those not content with spotting the latest trivial variation on current themes. It can come only from those whose idea of boldness is not—waiting to see what can be done with waste products that has never been done before.

The point is not that there are no negatives out there in the world for art to confront, or that art cannot be a means of criticism. There are negatives and art should never shrink from them. My argument is with the uniform negativity and destructiveness of the art world. When has art in the twentieth century said *anything* encouraging about human relations, about mankind's potential for dignity and courage, about the sheer positive passion of being in the world?

Artistic revolutions are made by a few key individuals. At the heart of every revolution is an artist who achieves originality. A novel theme, a fresh subject, or the inventive use of composition, or color marks the beginning of a new era. Artists truly are gods: they create a world in their work, and they contribute to the creation of our cultural world.

Yet for revolutionary artists to reach the rest of the world, others play a crucial role. Collectors, gallery owners, curators, and critics make decisions about which artists are genuinely creating—and, accordingly, about which artists are most deserving of their money, gallery space, and recommendations. Those individuals also make the revolutions. In the broader art world, a revolution depends on those who are capable of recognizing the original artist's achievement and who have the entrepreneurial courage to promote that work.

The point is not to return to the 1800s or to turn art into the making of pretty postcards. The point is about being a human being who looks at the world afresh. In

each generation there are only a few who do that at the highest level. That is always the challenge of art and its highest calling.

The world of postmodern art is a run-down hall of mirrors reflecting tiredly some innovations introduced a century ago. It is time to move on.

## About the author

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