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Chapter 7: And Now for Something Completely Different: The Versatility of Conceptual Innovators

Introduction

In recent decades, it has become fashionable for scholars of art history to disdain systematic comparison or generalization. Much recent scholarship in the discipline considers one artist, or even one work, at a time. Art historians' unwillingness, or inability, to carry out systematic comparative analyses has often led to a failure to recognize and understand important patterns of artistic behavior. This chapter examines a striking example of such a failure, in which a form of creative behavior that has become enormously important in the art of the twentieth century has been neglected because every instance of it has been treated as idiosyncratic.

The following section of this chapter documents an observation that art historians have made about what they consider a puzzling practice of modern painters. Specifically, in three separate instances, a scholar commented on the behavior of a single painter, then attempted to explain the behavior by considering only that one artist. Although the observation was precisely the same in all three cases, the scholars were different in each case, the artist in question was also different, and none of the scholars showed any awareness of any other instance of this observation. My contention is that the failure to recognize the commonality of the artistic behavior at issue precluded satisfactory explanation of it. The practice noted by the scholars is in fact not unique to any artist, but rather is characteristic of a class of artists. The general explanation for the three painters' behavior is both simpler and more powerful than explanations that appeal to individual idiosyncrasy. Understanding this explanation furthermore allows us to

recognize the same phenomenon in other arts, and in scholarship.

The One-Man Group Exhibition: Three Episodes

In 1985, the eminent art historian Meyer Schapiro began an essay titled "The Unity of Picasso's Art" with the following observation:

> Picasso's art presents itself to us today as an example of a lifework that one cannot describe in terms of any single set of characteristics. If the works of Pablo Picasso were not identified directly with his name, if they were shown together in a big exhibition, it would be rather difficult to say that they were the work of one man.[1]

In 1996, the art historian David Campbell opened a paper titled "Plotting Polke" with the following observation:

> One of the most intriguing aspects of Sigmar Polke's work is the way it defies attempts to read it as a unified project. So marked is the sense of aesthetic and thematic disjuncture in the work that visiting a Polke exhibition is often like wandering around a group show.[2]

And in an article written in 2002, the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto observed that:

> visitors to the magnificent Museum of Modern Art retrospective of [Gerhard] Richter's work since 1962 ... are certain to be baffled by the fact that he seems to vacillate between realism and abstraction, or even between various styles of abstraction, often at the same time. These vacillations seemed to me so extreme when I first saw a retrospective of Richter's work in Chicago in 1987, that it looked like I was seeing some kind of group show.[3]

It is striking that three different observers, writing about three different artists, all used exactly the same metaphor, of a one-man exhibition that appeared to be a group show. In all three cases, furthermore, the phenomenon of an artist producing unrelated works was not merely a puzzling practice involving appearances, but raised deeper problems for the observers. For

Schapiro, it raised a question about commitment:

> There exists in his practice a radical change with respect to the very concept of working, of production. Working involves, at least within our tradition, the commitment to a necessary way of working. If you can work in any other way you please, then no one way has a necessity; there is an element of caprice or arbitrariness of choice.[4]

Campbell made a similar observation:

> As a result of this aesthetic mobility, doubts arise about his artistic integrity... This reaction, no doubt anticipated by Polke, has the unfortunate consequence of questioning the control, conviction, and seriousness of his artistic programme.[5]

And Danto also made a similar comment:

> For most artists in America, it is important that they be stylistically identifiable, as if their style is their brand. To change styles too often inevitably would have been read as a lack of conviction.[6]

In the essays I have quoted, Schapiro, Campbell, and Danto all proceeded to discuss the problem of why an artist would work in multiple styles, and all offered explanations. It is not my concern here to evaluate those explanations, except to note that each concentrated on the work and practice of the single artist under consideration, without systematic comparison or examination of the work of any other artist. I believe that these explanations cannot allow us to understand the basic source of the variety of styles used by each of the three artists, nor can they allow us to resolve satisfactorily the question of these artists' integrity. For I believe that there is a general explanation for these three cases, that also applies to the work and practices of many other artists.

Conceptual Innovators

The practice of an artist working in multiple styles is a characteristic of a number of

conceptual innovators. This is a class of artists whose work is intended to communicate their emotions or ideas. Conceptual painters often plan their works carefully, to carry out specific goals. In a general description of conceptual innovators, in 2001 I wrote the following:

> Because their goals are precise, conceptual artists are often satisfied that they have produced one or more works that achieve a specific purpose. Unlike experimental artists, whose inability to achieve their goals often ties them to a single problem for a whole career, the conceptual artist's ability to be satisfied that a problem has been solved can free him to pursue new goals. The careers of some important conceptual artists have consequently been marked by a series of innovations, each very different from the others.[7]

Picasso, Polke, and Richter are all examples of important conceptual innovators who have made more than a single innovation.

Table 1 presents the distribution over the three artists' careers of all the illustrations of their work contained in a large number of survey textbooks of art history. This shows that Picasso and Polke both fit the pattern most common to conceptual innovators, of producing their most important contributions early in their careers. For Picasso this was the invention of Cubism in 1907, at the age of 26. Art historians have analyzed in detail the sources of Cubism, as Picasso synthesized elements taken from African art, early Iberian sculpture, and the paintings of Cézanne and Gauguin.[8] Yet the synthesis was a revolutionary one, for it challenged the traditional purpose of painting. As John Berger observed, with Cubism

> The concept of painting as it had existed since the Renaissance was overthrown. The idea of holding up a mirror to nature became a nostalgic one ... Painting became a schematic art. The painter's task was no longer to represent or imitate what existed ... The metaphorical model of Cubism is the *diagram*: the diagram being a visible, symbolic representation of invisible processes, forces, structures.[9]

Thus the young Picasso pioneered a conceptual form of art in which the artist would no longer present visual descriptions of objects, but would instead symbolize his knowledge of them.

Polke's most important contribution was the invention of German Pop art in 1963, when he was 22 years old. Polke's early Pop works were influenced by illustrations of paintings by Warhol and Lichtenstein that he saw during 1962-63. He followed Warhol in taking images from magazine photographs, and like Lichtenstein he constructed these images by mimicking the benday dots that form photographs in newspapers and magazines. But Polke adapted both of these devices to his own purposes, as he avoided the glamorous individuals and sensational events chosen by Warhol in favor of more pedestrian subjects, and he gave greater emphasis than Lichtenstein to the benday dots, thus making the photographic images of his paintings compete with the patterns created by the irregularly colored dots. The result was recognizable as Pop art, but in a form distinctively different from those of the American artists.[10] Yet German Pop art shared its conceptual basis with its older American relative, as it used mechanical reproduction, or its appearance, to recreate images drawn from popular culture.

Richter's career pattern is quite different. The absence of any illustrations of his work prior to the age of 30 is understandable as a consequence of his delayed exposure to advanced art. Richter was born and raised in East Germany, and his early studies in art were done there. His first opportunity to study advanced art did not occur until he moved to West Germany in 1961. When he enrolled in the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie in that year he was 29, nine years older than his classmate Polke. He joined Polke in creating German Pop art in 1963, while both were still students.

The early innovations of conceptual innovators are generally formal ones, made by

synthesizing earlier artists' work. This was true of Picasso's early innovations in Cubism, and of Polke's and Richter's early Pop art. In most cases, conceptual artists' creativity declines considerably after these early contributions, generally because they become accustomed to working in the style or with the technique they invented in their youth. In some cases, however, these artists may be jarred out of this process of repetition. Such was the case with both Picasso and Richter.

In 1937, at the age of 56, Picasso painted *Guernica* in response to the destruction of the Basque town of Guernica by German bombers during the Spanish Civil War. This painting became one of the most important works not only of Picasso's career, but of twentieth-century art. In 1988, at the age of 56, Richter executed 15 paintings based on photographs of the dead bodies of three members of the urban guerilla Baader-Meinhof group, who had died in a German prison in 1977. These paintings became the most controversial, and celebrated, works of Richter's career. What is clear is that these unusual creative revivals, relatively late in these two conceptual artists' careers, were the product of enormously strong stimuli. Thus while he was working on *Guernica*, Picasso declared his outrage against the Spanish fascists: "My whole life as an artist has been nothing more than a continuous struggle against reaction and the death of art. How could anybody think for a moment that I could be in agreement with reaction and death?"[11] Similarly, at a press conference in 1988, Richter spoke of his need to make his Baader-Meinhof paintings: "The deaths of the terrorists, and the related events both before and after, stand for a horror that distressed me and has haunted me as unfinished business ever since, despite all my efforts to suppress it."[12] The declining creativity of conceptual artists with age is not a physiological phenomenon, but is rather the product of habit, as an artist's ways of thinking

become ingrained over time. In some cases, including those of Picasso and Richter, the artist's reaction to an external event is so powerful that it destroys some of the artist's habits, and results in a new novel artistic contribution.

Picasso famously declared that "I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them."[13] Richter equally expressed his belief in the conceptual nature of art, writing to a friend that "Pictures are the idea in visual or pictorial form." Richter often paints from photographs, and he has explained that this eliminates the need to make decisions in the process of executing his works: "When I paint from a photograph, conscious thinking is eliminated." The image was predetermined and preconceived: "by painting from photographs, I was relieved of the need to choose or construct a subject."[14]

In 1984, Richter explained his versatility to an interviewer, recalling that earlier in his career he had deliberately "created some space for myself, protected myself, as it were, against being tied down, in order to maintain the freedom to do what I like – to try anything I like, and not to become an artist-painter who is tied down to a single trick." He recognized that there were benefits associated with working in a single style: "you can be very successful with a trick like that, because it makes you easier to recognize." But he observed that his strategy of deliberately varying his styles could also lead to success: "it works this way too. It has now become my identifying characteristic that my work is all over the place."[15] The critic Peter Schjeldahl agreed, as he observed that "His range of styles – from Pop to Minimalist to Photo-Realist and several varieties of abstract – has seemed perversely promiscuous, as if he were heaping obloquy on the very idea of style."[16]

Integrity and Style

In questioning the seriousness or integrity of these conceptual artists, Schapiro, Campbell, and Danto followed a number of earlier observers. As early as 1919, Piet Mondrian wrote from Paris to his fellow painter Theo van Doesburg in Holland with a report on the art world: "I also went to the Picasso exhibition. Old and new work, not much changed, but I thought his latest work less serious, less convincing. I hear he is doing other work, not to make money, but *because he wants to be versatile*!! That's right: his work can't be convincing then, can it?"[17] In 1921, the German artist Oskar Schlemmer wrote to a friend of his reaction to a book that surveyed Picasso's career: "I was amazed at the versatility of the man. An actor, the comic genius among artists? For everything is there: he could easily assume the role of any artist of the past or of any modern painter."[18] Interestingly, however, in the same year the painter and critic Amedée Ozenfant had specifically explained Picasso's practice. Writing in a Paris journal, Ozenfant remarked on the clarity of Picasso's intent, and the precision with which he expressed himself: "When he paints a picture, he knows what he wants to say and what kind of picture will in fact say it: his forms and colors are judiciously chosen to achieve the desired end, and he uses them like the words of vocabulary." Continuing the parallel between plastic forms and language, Ozenfant responded to critics who believed that Picasso's execution of representational works meant that he had repudiated Cubism: "Can such people not understand that Cubism and figurative painting are two different languages, and that a painter is free to choose either of them as he may judge it better suited to what he has to say?" [19]

Ozenfant anticipated the concerns of Schapiro, Campbell, and Danto, and his response to them was thus to explain the attitude of the conceptual artist who is free to change forms and

styles as he changes problems. Implicitly, these three observers were all judging the conceptual artists in question by the standard of experimental artists. A colleague of Campbell's, writing in the same symposium, did this explicitly, comparing Polke's practice with that of the experimental Abstract Expressionists:

> [Polke] signals no single-minded commitment to a worthy programme (such as the pursuit of pure painterliness associated with American Abstract Expressionism, the paradigmatic intentionality of post-war avant-gardes). Critics who are primed to look for evidence of such integrity of purpose, of prolonged "struggle" with an heroic problematic, find none in Polke, and may assume therefore that he is opportunistic and undiscriminating.[20]

The conceptual Picasso's ability to choose styles to fit his changing ideas could not have differed more from that of an experimental painter like Cézanne, who undertook a lifelong quest to create a style that would allow him to achieve a single goal, and the same is true of the conceptual Polke and Richter in comparison with the experimental Abstract Expressionists. These conceptual artists' periodic alternation of styles, like their rapid development of new styles over the course of their careers, reflected the basis of their art in ideas that could be formulated and expressed quickly, whereas the experimental artists' steadfast commitment to a single style, that could evolve only gradually over time, was a product of the visual nature of their art, and the impossibility of fully achieving their elusive goals. It is critical to recognize that rapid changes of approach and style, which would signal insincerity on the part of an experimental artist, can be signs of vitality for conceptual innovators.

Picasso as Prototype

> This will be Picasso's main contribution to art. To have been able to start from a new source, and to keep this freshness with regard to whatever new expressions mark the different epochs of his

> career … Picasso in each one of his facets, has made clear his intention to keep free from preceding achievements.
>
> Marcel Duchamp, 1943[21]

A succession of observers have commented on Picasso's frequent and sudden changes of style. As early as 1912, in his celebrated book, *On the Spiritual in Art*, the artist Wassily Kandinsky remarked on Picasso's abrupt and radical changes, and noted that these shocked even Picasso's admirers:

> Led on always by the need for self-expression, often driven wildly onward, Picasso throws himself from one external means to another. If a chasm lies between them, Picasso makes a wild leap, and there he is, standing on the other side, much to the horror of his incredibly numerous followers. They had just thought they had caught up with him; now they must begin the painful descent and start the climb again.[22]

In the same year, Roger Fry observed that "It is dangerous and difficult to speak of Picasso, for he is changing with kaleidoscopic rapidity … He is the most gifted, the most incredibly facile of artists."[23] In 1920, when Picasso was still not yet 40 years old, the English critic Clive Bell remarked that "His career has been a series of discoveries, each of which he has rapidly developed. A highly original and extremely happy conception enters his head ... Forthwith he sets himself to analyze it... Before long he has established what looks like an infallible method for producing an effect of which, a few months earlier, no one had so much as dreamed."[24] In 1925 the Spanish artist Josep Llorens Artigas observed that Picasso painted "with neither law nor system, and he adopts for each work original attitudes and solutions, thus creating that stylistic inconsistency which is the dominant note in his painting, we might say, 'his own style.'"[25] In 1928, the German poet and critic Carl Einstein recognized that Picasso was a "pluralistic spirit,"

who could not be constrained by any single method, but who worked in a "polyphony of styles." Einstein described Picasso as "a man who has blown apart, as none other has, the limitations, the obsessional narrowness, of the practices of art."[26] Decades later the English novelist and critic John Berger observed that Picasso's work was made up of "sudden inexplicable transformations," and declared that "In the life work of no other artist is each group of works so independent of those which have just gone before, or so irrelevant to those which are to follow."[27] Picasso's biographer Pierre Cabanne made the same point by contrasting Picasso and Cézanne: "There was not one Picasso, but ten, twenty, always different, unpredictably changing, and in this he was the opposite of a Cézanne, whose work ... followed that logical, reasonable course to fruition."[28] Meyer Schapiro remarked on a consequence of Picasso's changes: "There is no example in all history of another painter who has been able to create such a diversity of works and to give them the power of successful art."[29]

Art scholars have been struck, however, not only by the fact that Picasso frequently changed styles, but that he often alternated between two styles, using two very different manners to make different works at the same time. Thus Schapiro remarked that in 1921, "In the morning he made Cubist paintings; in the afternoon he made Neoclassical paintings." In a recognition similar to that of Ozenfant, Schapiro then observed: "So that for him the two styles were both available and belonged to two different aspects of his personality."[30] Jack Flam later echoed Schapiro, noting that "As early as 1915 Picasso had begun making meticulously rendered realistic drawings, and by the early 1920s he was alternating between a full-blown neoclassical style and more planar and abstract Synthetic Cubist imagery."[31]

What was startling about Picasso's practice was not simply that he made significant

changes in style: Schapiro pointed out, for example, that in the 1880s an English writer had remarked that major works Raphael had made a decade apart could have been by different artists.[32] What was novel in Picasso's approach was the frequency of his changes, and his ability to shift back and forth between styles. Flam reflected on the latter:

> Picasso was able effectively and convincingly to employ conflicting styles at will, and he used these with great energy – another instance of his uncommon sensitivity to the arbitrariness of different languages. In fact, he was probably the first Western artist to insist willfully and persistently on the relative arbitrariness of the means of pictorial representation.[33]

Picasso thus appears to mark a turning point, for the first time using stylistic change as a deliberate strategy, a systematic practice that he used to achieve multiple goals. The English critic David Sylvester recognized this when he explained in 1996 why Picasso himself had been the key problem facing critics in the twentieth century: "Picasso is a kind of artist who couldn't have existed before this century, since his art is a celebration of this century's introduction of a totally promiscuous eclecticism into the practice of art."[34] In a century marked by a heightened demand for innovation in art, Picasso's demonstration of how an individual artist could innovate frequently and radically became an inspiration for some of the most imaginative conceptual artists who came after him.

In a rare extended interview he gave to a friend in 1923, Picasso expressed his belief that the artist was free to choose styles as he wished, because styles were no more than forms of communication. Thus he declared that "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth ... The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies." He explained that he chose styles that suited the problem at hand: "If the

subjects I have wanted to express have suggested different ways of expression I have never hesitated to adopt them ... Whenever I had something to say, I have said it in the manner in which I have felt it ought to be said. Different motives inevitably require different methods of expression." One key consequence of this he stressed was that changes in an artist's style should not be interpreted as growth or improvement, but should be recognized merely as a succession: "Variation does not mean evolution. If an artist varies his mode of expression this only means that he has changed his manner of thinking, and in changing, it might be for the better or it might be for the worse." He insisted that his own history was a case in point: "The several manners I have used in my art must not be considered as an evolution, or as steps toward an unknown ideal of painting. All I have ever made was made for the present."[35]

Late in his life, Cézanne wrote to his friend and dealer Ambroise Vollard of his frustration:

> I am working doggedly, for I see the promised land before me. Shall I be like the Hebrew leader or shall I be able to enter? ... I have made some progress. Why so late and with such difficulty? Is art really a priesthood that demands the pure in heart who must belong to it entirely?[36]

Picasso understood the importance of Cézanne's art not only for his own innovations, but for the advanced art of the early twentieth century in general: thus in 1943 he told a friend that Cézanne "was my one and only master ... He was like a father to us all."[37] Yet unlike Cézanne, for Picasso art was not a lifelong quest along a single path toward an unknown goal of the true style, but rather the expression of a series of ideas, often unrelated, using whatever means were appropriate. Declaring that "when I paint my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for," Picasso became a model for many later conceptual finders.[38] In changing styles

at will, he also became a prototype of a new form of conceptual artist, for whom style would not be a matter of integrity, but merely a convenient vehicle for expression.

Followers

The analysis presented above improves our understanding of the methods and art of Picasso, Polke, and Richter. Yet the significance of the analysis extends far beyond these three important artists – to other painters, and to practitioners of other arts.

Considering first other visual artists, versatility has been a characteristic of a number of the most important conceptual innovators of the twentieth century. A prime early example is Marcel Duchamp. In his 1913 book, *The Cubist Painters*, the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire began his treatment of Duchamp's work with a comment that parallels those of Schapiro, Campbell, and Danto, as he observed that "Marcel Duchamp has not yet painted enough pictures and his work is too varied for us to assess his true talent from the available evidence."[39] Nearly a century later, the conceptual artist William Anastasi recalled that when he first saw a collection of Duchamp's art, "What struck me about it was not only that Duchamp's work was different from everybody else's, but that every Duchamp was so completely different from every other Duchamp."[40] Francis Naumann observed that Duchamp's "working method involved a constant search for alternatives – alternatives not only to accepted artistic practice, but also to his own earlier work."[41] John Coplans remarked that "Duchamp is the preeminent example of the didactic revolutionary among artists. Duchamp made each of his works, step by step, a special lesson. Never repeating himself, he made of inconsistency an unbreakable law."[42] William Rubin declared of the period 1911-15, when Duchamp was in his mid-20s, that "No four years in the work of any other modern painter ... witness so many radical departures in method

and idea." Rubin understood that Duchamp could change his art so quickly and decisively because of his conceptual approach: "Duchamp advances speculatively, not by painting but *through cerebration*; the finished work represents the plastic re-creation of a reality which has grown to maturity in the mind."[43]

Duchamp's variations occurred within a very different volume of output from that of Picasso, for unlike Picasso, who made many works within each of his adopted styles, Duchamp made very few works of art. Early in his career, the rejection of his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* by the 1912 Salon des Indépendants, because the judges considered it an attack on Cubism, led Duchamp to the conclusion that that movement had grown dogmatic and rigid in just a few years, and prompted him to vow never to become set in his own taste. Because he reasoned that taste was a product of habit, he determined to avoid repetition. It was in view of this that he once remarked that "I've had thirty-three ideas; I've made thirty-three paintings."[44] Duchamp was among the most protean of conceptual innovators, and his career was marked by the production of a series of works that had little in common other than their conceptual origins and their purpose of undermining basic conventions of Western art.

Late in his life, Duchamp recalled that his many early abrupt changes stemmed from an attitude that he had shared with Francis Picabia, another conceptual painter who was his closest friend when the two were beginning their careers: "Fundamentally, I had a mania for change, like Picabia. One does something for six months, a year, and one goes on to something else. That's what Picabia did all his life."[45] Picabia recognized his conceptual orientation early in his career, when his grandfather, an amateur photographer, warned him to give up painting, arguing that color photography would make painting obsolete. The young artist rejected that advice,

thinking that “You can photograph a landscape, but not the forms that I have in my head.” [46] William Camfield, a biographer of Picabia, observed that “his art functioned with a responsiveness approaching that of speech. It was called up to express his thoughts, emotions and reveries.”[47] In a tribute to Picabia, Duchamp described his career as “a kaleidoscopic series of art experiences … hardly related to one another in their external appearances.” Duchamp considered his old friend a liberator: “In his fifty years of painting Picabia has consistently avoided adhering to any formula or wearing a badge. He could be called the greatest exponent of freedom in art.”[48]

Picabia made frequent changes in style a deliberate policy, declaring that “If you want to have clean ideas, change them as often as you change your shirts.”[49] Camfield noted that over a career of fifty years his paintings “ranged over styles related to Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, abstract art, figurative art, Dada and Surrealism.”[50] Picabia was the only child of an affluent family, and the combination of his opulent lifestyle and artistic versatility caused critics to question his sincerity and commitment: “Early in his career, Picabia was labeled a millionaire joker.”[51] Picabia understood that this perception was the cost of what he considered the proper approach to art, and advised other artists that “There is only one way to save your life; sacrifice your reputation.”[52]

Like many other conceptual artists, Picabia’s styles usually grew directly out of the work of earlier artists. Thus Camfield observed that “So frequently ... was Picabia’s work an apparent response or reaction to the art of others that this phenomenon looms as a basic element in his creative process.”[53] Roberto Ohrt stressed the enormous range of these sources: “The spectrum of quotes that Picabia uses in his art points to a lexical archive containing visual art throughout

the ages and from all regions."[54] Camfield concluded that both Picabia's use of earlier art and his need for change "amounted to much more than the inconstancy of a playboy artist: it was a profound element of his character."[55] And, also like many other conceptual artists, Picabia was skeptical of the idea that an artist might improve with age. Thus late in his life he told a young artist that "Experience is absolutely useless."[56]

The painter Richard Hamilton, who was one of the key figures in developing English Pop art, in 1956 systematically constructed a collage, titled *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, that became a Pop icon and one of the most important works of art of the 20th century.[57] Yet Hamilton made no other works in the same style, and throughout his career his art has been marked by extreme diversity. Harold Rosenberg observed that "Hamilton's career is one of continual transition."[58] As Richard Morphet wrote in the catalogue to a 1970 retrospective of Hamilton's work, "Before as well as after 1956, Hamilton had painted each work in the style best suited to it, however sharp an idiomatic shift this might entail."[59]

Early in his career, Hamilton made a series of drawings to illustrate Joyce's *Ulysses*. To reflect Joyce's verbal stylistic changes, each of Hamilton's illustrations was done in a different style, as he tried to create visual equivalents for Joyce's verbal devices.[60] Hamilton later reflected that studying *Ulysses* had taught him a lesson that he applied to his art: "Joyce's readiness to ape the manner of other writers and genres ... freed me from inhibitions about the uniquely personal mark that every painter is supposed to strive for."[61]

The English art historian Edward Lucie-Smith recognized the conceptual source of Hamilton's variations in style, observing that his "productions tend to differ radically from one another because each is the embodiment of an idea and the idea itself has been allowed to

dominate the material form."[62] David Sylvester remarked that Hamilton's development as an artist was marked by unpredictability, and explained that this was a product of the fact that his works were generally exercises, in which the subjects were dictated by Hamilton's continuing interest in understanding new styles: "he first gets interested in some form or other of visual communication and ... he then finds the sorts of subject-matter which suit that language or technique or method."[63]

Hamilton was a devoted follower of Duchamp; he spent several years translating and publishing Duchamp's notes for *The Large Glass*, and in 1966 he produced a replica of that work, which Duchamp co-signed.[64] In 1977, Hamilton wrote that he admired Duchamp above other artists: "I've found his work more interesting, more exciting, more durable, than any other." He respected Duchamp for "the variety in his work. He covered so much ground ... Once he'd done something, he was likely to turn his attention to another thing." Hamilton tried to do the same with his own art: "In this century, at all events, there are no techniques more valid than others."[65]

Jasper Johns described Robert Rauschenberg as the artist who "invented the most since Picasso."[66] Early in his career Rauschenberg made a series of radical innovations, all the embodiments of new ideas, and all motivated by his stated goal of working in the gap between art and life. Among these early works was a drawing by Willem de Kooning that Rauschenberg carefully erased. Rauschenberg explained that "the whole idea just came from my wanting to know whether a drawing could be made out of erasing;" the critic Harold Rosenberg described it as a turning point in contemporary art:

> Art-historically, the erasing would be seen as a symbolic act of

> liberation from the pervasive force of Abstract Expressionism ... "Erased de Kooning" became the cornerstone of a new academy, devoted to replacing the arbitrary self of the artist with predefined processes and objectives – that is to say, Minimalism and Conceptualism.[67]

Rauschenberg's most celebrated innovation was his creation of a new artistic genre in 1955, at the age of 30. During that year he began to attach more and more real objects to his paintings – "I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real word" – until the works became three-dimensional and often free-standing, prompting Rauschenberg to give them a new name, of "combine."[68] Two of the early combines, *Bed* (1955) and *Monogram* (1959), are among the half-dozen American art works of the 1950s and early '60s that are most often reproduced in textbooks of art history.[69]

The diversity of Rauschenberg's work has troubled many critics. Thus Calvin Tomkins conceded that "There would always be critics for whom Rauschenberg was too protean, too experimental, or too outrageous to be taken seriously as an artist," and Robert Mattison remarked that "The majority of commentators have viewed Rauschenberg's art as a random accumulation of unrelated objects and images, and the artist himself has encouraged such interpretations."[70] Throughout his career, Rauschenberg has demonstrated his desire to create new works unrelated to his earlier ones. In 1964, Rauschenberg received his first major honor when he was awarded first prize for painting at the Venice Biennale. The next day, he telephoned from Venice to a friend in New York, to ask him to go to Rauschenberg's studio and destroy all his old silk screens. According to Calvin Tomkins, "There were about a hundred and fifty screens all told, representing a sizable financial investment as well as a rich bank of images. Destroying them was a form of insurance against the pressure to repeat himself."[71] Recently Rauschenberg

explained that he tries to clear his mind before he begins to work: “Everything I can remember, and everything I know, I have probably already done, or somebody else has.” He regards the accumulation of knowledge as his enemy: “Knowing more only encourages your limitations.”[72]

Controversy still surrounds much of Rauschenberg’s work, but there is little disagreement on two propositions. One is that his influence on recent art has been enormous: so for example Arthur Danto wrote in 1997 that “the artistic mainstream today is very largely Rauschenbergian.”[73] The other is that, like many conceptual innovators, Rauschenberg’s significant contributions were made early in his career. As the English critic Richard Cork regretfully concluded in 1981, “No *enfant* was more *terrible* than Rauschenberg in his heyday, but the trouble is that even the most precocious child has to grow up. Now well into his fifties, he has long since outlived the effervescence which once gave his work such an infectious sense of involvement with urban life.”[74]

Andy Warhol’s friend and biographer, David Bourdon, wrote that “Warhol strove to be a jack-of-all-arts. It wasn’t enough for him to be recognized merely as an artist, filmmaker, and show-business entrepreneur. He fantasized about having a hit movie playing at Radio City Music Hall, a Broadway show at the Winter Garden, a television special, a book on the bestseller list, a Top-40 record, and the cover of *Life*. He truly believed he could keep several careers going simultaneously, winning acclaim in all of them.”[75] Although he didn’t accomplish all those goals, Warhol did make significant contributions in areas far from painting, most notably with movies. In a history of film, Robert Sklar wrote in 1993 that “The most significant alternative filmmaker of the 1960s may turn out to be the famed Pop artist Andy Warhol.”[76] In 1966, the director and critic Jonas Mekas reviewed Warhol’s *The Chelsea Girls* in *The Village Voice* as “a

very important film." He declared that "This is the first time I see in cinema an interesting solution of narrative techniques that enable cinema to present life in the complexity and richness achieved by modern literature."[77] The critic Geoff Andrew observed that Warhol's style in film raised questions about the nature of the medium, and remarked that "It is perhaps appropriate therefore that its relationship to mainstream cinema is also primarily conceptual."[78]

David Hockney, the most important English painter of his generation, is a versatile conceptual artist who was brilliant early in his career.[79] In 1962, his final year as a student at London's Royal College of Art, for his entry in the school's student exhibition Hockney executed a series of four paintings, each in a different style, that he titled collectively *Demonstrations of Versatility*. Hockney later explained that "I deliberately set out to prove I could do four entirely different sorts of picture, like Picasso." He emphasized the point by giving each painting an individual title that identified its style.[80] A few years later, Hockney remarked that he often deliberately painted different parts of a single picture in different styles.[81] Marco Livingstone, a friend and biographer of Hockney, explained that his deliberate use of contrasting styles was his way of "seeking refuge from the Abstract Expressionist ... notion of painting as existential autobiography." Hockney wanted to make it clear that he was not a visual seeker, but a conceptual finder: "Just as an image was selected rather than simply discovered in a haphazard manner, so a particular style could be quoted rather than adopted unthinkingly. In so doing, the artist declared the preeminence of choice and control in the making of his picture."[82]

Bruce Nauman is among the most influential artists working today: as early as 1990, Peter Schjeldahl described him as "a maverick who at one time or another has affected the course of just about every visual medium except painting, earning a prestige among serious younger

artists like that of no one else since Jasper Johns."[83] Early in his career, Nauman was influenced by a retrospective exhibition of the work of Man Ray, a sometime collaborator of Duchamp's, who had worked variously as a painter, photographer, and film maker: "To me Man Ray seemed to avoid the idea that every piece had to take on a historical meaning. What I liked was that there appeared to be no consistency to his thinking, no one style."[84] Throughout his career, Nauman has done conceptual work in a wide range of genres. Schjeldahl remarked that "Artists in the late 1960s were optimistic about the aesthetic potential of technologies and systems, and Nauman played with most of them – video, film, photography, light, sound, language, mathematics, holography, and more – to memorable effect. His work was Duchampian in its wit and insolence, in its teeming paradoxes, puns, and other forms of mental short-circuitry."[85] One of Nauman's most celebrated early works, a photograph of himself spouting water from his mouth titled *Self-Portrait as a Fountain,* was a tribute to Duchamp's famous readymade, *Fountain*. Nauman explained the diversity of his work by saying "I've never been able to stick to one thing."[86] He also explained that the variety of his output has always made his work a struggle: "I realized I would never have a single process; I would always have to reinvent it over and over again... On the other hand, that's what is interesting about making art, and why it's worth doing: it's never going to be the same, there is no method."[87] The difficulty of his art was a consequence of its purpose: "I think the hardest thing to do is to present an idea in the most straightforward way."[88] In a review of a Nauman retrospective in 1994, Michael Kimmelman observed that "His signature style is the lack of one ... Even more than with Gerhard Richter or Sigmar Polke, you begin to understand Mr. Nauman only once you see the eclecticism."[89] Schjeldahl agreed: "There is no Nauman style."[90]

Damien Hirst's art is enormously varied, in subject as well as genre. His works include dead animals – whole or sectioned – suspended in tanks filled with formaldehyde, giant ash trays filled with cigarette butts, a ping pong ball suspended on a column of air, paintings of colored circles, and photo realist paintings of images ranging from pills in a medicine cabinet to the aftermath of a suicide bombing in Baghdad. Louisa Buck described Hirst's philosophy, and traced its source: "At the heart of Hirst's success – or, according to some, his fatal flaw – is his impudent updating of Marcel Duchamp's conviction that anything can be art if the artist says so. According to Hirst, the only artistic parameters that exist are those that you draw up for yourself. Whether he is making a video for the Britpop band Blur, producing artwork for a Dave Stewart album, decorating a fashionable restaurant, or slicing up a pig to make a sculpture, it is all art. 'I just wanted to find out where the boundaries were,' he says. 'I've found out that there aren't any. I wanted to be stopped, and no one will stop me.'"[91] Hirst's art draws on a wide range of earlier styles and artists. As Jerry Saltz observed, "Hirst's work has always been derivative; that's one of its strengths. His art is an original melange, a mutant sprung from virtually every movement that preceded it."[92] Interestingly, Hirst echoed Schapiro, Campbell, and Danto in commenting on the diversity of his own production: "I curate my own work as if I were a group of artists."[93] He also explained that he deliberately avoids consistency: "I'm aware that a lot of the things I make at the moment are kind of the same idea. I worry about that. I mean, I don't want to make 'Damien Hirsts.'"[94]

Beyond Painting

Versatility has also been a characteristic of twentieth-century conceptual innovators in arts other than painting. A few important examples can illustrate this. Ezra Pound was one of the

most influential poets of the early twentieth century. He was famously precocious, as his early achievements included the invention of a new poetic doctrine, Imagism, at the age of 27. The critic Hugh Kenner remarked on the conceptual nature of the innovation: "The imagist ... is not concerned with getting down the general look of the thing ... The imagist's fulcrum ... is the process of cognition itself."[95] The literary historian Donald Stauffer remarked on the extraordinary diversity of Pound's work:

> Taken as a whole, Pound's early poetry – published in five separate volumes between 1909 and 1915 [when Pound was 24-30 years old] – is an astonishing display of variety and versatility ... [H]e wrote poems in a wide range of styles and modes: Catullan satire, Imagesque poems, Browningesque dramatic monologues, impressions, manifestoes, and translations from the Anglo-Saxon and Chinese.[96]

Pound's friend James Joyce was a conceptual innovator in fiction. One obituarist described Joyce as "the great research scientist of letters, handling words with the same freedom and originality that Einstein handles mathematical symbols," and observed that "even the strongest of his characters seems dwarfed by the great apparatus of learning that he brings to bear on them."[97] In *Ulysses,* widely considered the most influential novel of the twentieth century, Joyce deliberately adopted different styles in different chapters. The critic Edna O'Brien remarked that the styles were "so variable that the eighteen episodes could really be described as eighteen novels between the one cover."[98] The surprising juxtapositions of styles in *Ulysses* led the French critic Pierre Courthion to compare the book to the protean work of Picasso.[99] Terry Eagleton observed that "*Ulysses* is an enormous repertoire of 'packaged' styles and discourses, no one of which is absolute." Considering Joyce's oeuvre as whole, Eagleton posed the question "What... is James Joyce's style?," and reflected that "The question is almost impossible to

answer, as it is not in the case of Jane Austen or William Faulkner." Eagleton recognized that Joyce's prose did not have the consistency of these two experimental writers: "His writing is motley, hybrid, mongrelized, a thing of shreds and patches. Words are shot through with other words, one style is bounced off another, one language folded within a second."[100]

Five decades after *Ulysses*, Thomas Pynchon, another conceptual innovator, published a novel that is frequently compared to Joyce's masterpiece.[101] One scholar remarked that "the prose style of *Gravity's Rainbow* is not a single style but an impressive compendium of many styles which contribute considerable power to the paradox within the novel," while another observed that the book's narrative styles range "from Kabbalistic revelation, to formulaic romance, to folk-myth, to cinematic parody, to comic book classic, to technological manual, to sewer fantasy, to rocket graffiti."[102] In a review of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Richard Poirier declared that "At thirty-six, Pynchon has established himself as a novelist of major historical importance."[103]

When a friend told John Cage that he planned to lecture on Cage's musical style, the composer replied, "You have a problem – there are so many."[104] Cage is known for the diversity of his many innovations, including the prepared piano, compositional techniques that incorporate chance, and his work *4′33″*, in which a pianist sat for that length of time without touching the keyboard.[105] Cage was prompted to write *4′33″* when his friend Robert Rauschenberg exhibited his early white paintings, a series of panels with no images, that changed in appearance as shadows or reflections moved across them. The composer and critic Kyle Gann called August 29, 1952, the date of the work's first performance, a landmark in American music history, explaining that *4′33″* "requested a new attitude toward listening, and toward the concept of music

itself."[106] Just as Rauschenberg's paintings were intended to demonstrate that there was no such thing as an empty canvas, Cage's composition proved that sounds are always present.[107] Cage was a conceptual innovator, who consistently worked to expand the boundaries of music, and who was committed to persistent radical change: "If my work is accepted, I must move on to the point where it isn't." His answer to a question about his philosophy was a self-reflexive pun that could serve as a conceptual credo: "Get out of whatever cage you find yourself in."[108] Cage devoted much of his career to a variety of approaches to a goal that was not aural but conceptual, of "giving up control" over music, "so that sounds can be sounds."[109] John Rockwell concluded that

> Cage's music has undergone shifts of style and emphasis, as with almost all composers. In his case, though, the shifts have been radical ones, complete transformations of method, performing forces and sheer sound. What has remained constant is his questing spirit of adventure, his determination to seem fresh and even outrageous, and his meditative epistemology.[110]

In 1968, the film critic Manny Farber began an essay about Jean-Luc Godard by stressing the diversity of the director's movies:

> Each Godard film is of itself widely varied in persona as well as quality. Printed on the blackboard of one of his Formicalike later films, hardly to be noticed, is a list of African animals: giraffe, lion, hippo. At the end of this director's career, there will probably be a hundred films, each one a bizarrely different species, with its own excruciatingly singular skeleton, tendons, plumage ... Unlike Cézanne, who used a three-eighths-inch square stroke and nervously exacting line around every apple he painted, the form and manner of execution changes totally with each film.

Farber recognized that the diversity of Godard's films was a product of the director's conceptual approach:

> Braining it out before the project starts, most of the invention, the basic intellectual puzzle, is pretty well set in his mind before the omnipresent [cinematographer Raoul] Coutard gets the camera in position... Each of his pictures presents a puzzle of parts, a unique combination of elements to prove a preconceived theory.[111]

Three decades later, the critic Peter Wollen observed that Godard had made an additional 50 films since Farber had written his essay, and declared that "just as Farber predicted, each film seems to be *sui generis*, quite unlike any of his previous work, the same only in being so unpredictably, inconsistently different." In Godard's constant quotation from old Hollywood films and his equally consistent disregard for all of the conventions of those films, Wollen recognized a key characteristic of the conceptual artist, who borrows the techniques of his predecessors but often transforms them for uses that would appall those earlier practitioners: "Godard's films showed a contradictory reverence for the art of the past and delinquent refusal to obey any of its rules."[112] Godard himself consistently maintained that film was simply one possible means for expressing his ideas: "I think of myself as an essayist... only instead of writing, I film them. Were the cinema to disappear, I would simply accept the inevitable and turn to television; were television to disappear, I would revert to pencil and paper. For there is a clear continuity between all forms of expression. It's all one."[113] Gerald Mast summarized the common thread in Godard's work: "Godard films are consistent in their inconsistency, their eclecticism, their mixing of many different kinds of ideas and cinematic principles."[114]

Mast noted that Godard's New Wave colleague François Truffaut "also delighted in mixing cinematic styles."[115] Pauline Kael declared that "What's exciting about movies like [Truffaut's] *Shoot the Piano Player* and [Godard's] *Breathless* ... is that they, quite literally, move with the times. They are full of unresolved, inexplicable, disharmonious elements."[116]

Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar contended that the apparent incoherence of Truffaut's movies was an imitation of real life: "The swift changes of mood and pace that characterize his films are an attempt to match his form more nearly to the way life usually develops."[117] Truffaut's own account of his work was a bit different, however, comparing it not to life but to other forms of popular art: "For me the cinema is a show, and I compare a film to an act in the circus, or in a music hall." He conceded that *Shoot the Piano Player* "seems to contain four or five films," but explained "that's what I wanted. Above all I was looking for an explosion of the genre (the detective film) by mixing genres (comedy, drama, melodrama, the psychological film, the thriller, the love film, etc.). I know that the public detests nothing more than changes in tone, but I've always had a passion for changing tone."[118]

Conclusion

> How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract-Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you've given up something.
>
> Andy Warhol, 1963[119]

Conceptual innovators pose specific problems, and solve them. Their recognition that they have reached a goal can free them to pursue another one: that project is finished, their curiosity about it is satisfied, and they can go on to something else, perhaps completely different. This behavior is logical and reasonable to the conceptual artist, but appears problematic from the vantage point of his experimental counterpart. Experimental innovators' problems are generally broader, their goals less distinct. They are rarely satisfied that they have reached their goals, and many in fact come to doubt that their goals can be reached at all: the more they progress, the more distant their goal appears. Their persistent dissatisfaction with their efforts, and their

skepticism about the possibility of conclusive resolution of artistic goals, lead them to question the commitment and sincerity of any artist who changes styles, and goals, with any frequency.

Interestingly, recognition of the versatility of a number of important conceptual innovators in art during the past century adds a dimension to our appreciation of the significance of Picasso. Some of the greatest artists of the past influenced other artists not only through their innovations in style, but by providing new models of how artists create their work. So for example the greatness of Raphael and Titian is due not solely to their innovations in composition, form, and color, but also to the fact that Raphael inspired generations of conceptual painters with his meticulous planning of his canvases, and that Titian equally inspired generations of experimental painters with his unplanned direct approach to painting, and the repeated revisions by which he brought his works to completion.[120] In light of the present investigation, it appears similarly that Picasso's greatness lies not only in his innovations in form and subject, but also in his creation of a new model of artistic behavior, that of the versatile conceptual artist who makes frequent and precipitous changes in the style and form of his work. In 1943, when a visitor to Picasso's studio remarked that a statue Picasso had made from a child's scooter was not really a sculpture, the artist exclaimed: "What is sculpture? What is painting? Everyone's still clinging to outdated ideas, obsolete definitions, as if the artist's role was not precisely to offer new ones."[121] It was this realization, that artists could innovate freely and often by formulating new ideas and definitions, that made Picasso the prototype of the versatile conceptual innovator.

The parallel observations of Meyer Schapiro on Picasso, David Campbell on Polke, and Arthur Danto on Richter clearly demonstrate the dangers that attend the neglect of a comparative

approach in the analysis of art – a neglect that is not only widespread, but is actually celebrated by many contemporary humanists. These art scholars' surprise at the practices of these painters is a consequence of their failure to recognize that the practices are common among a class of artists, those I call conceptual. And the scholars' questions about the artists' integrity of purpose are equally a consequence of their failure to understand the systematic differences that exist in the practices and attitudes of conceptual and experimental artists. More specifically, art historians' failure to recognize the common basis of the behavior of versatile conceptual innovators has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the practices of some of the most influential innovators of the past century, including Picasso, Duchamp, Picabia, Beuys, Rauschenberg, Klein, Hockney, Nauman, Koons, and Hirst. We should also expect more names to be added to this list in future, because of the heavy emphasis on conceptual innovation in the contemporary art world: as Gerhard Richter observed in 1977, "changeable artists are a growing phenomenon. Picasso, for instance, or Duchamp and Picabia – and the number is certainly increasing all the time."[122]

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115. Mast, *A Short History of the Movies,* p. 351.

116. Peter Brunette, ed., *Shoot the Piano Player* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 152.

117. Brunette, *Shoot the Piano Player*, p. 252.

118. Brunette, *Shoot the Piano Player*, p. 135.

119. Kenneth Goldstein, ed., *I'll Be Your Mirror* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004), p. 17.

120. E.g. see Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 162-69; Robert Jensen, "Anticipating Artistic Behavior: New Research Tools for Art Historians," *Historical Methods,* Vol. 37, No. 3 (2004), pp. 137-53.

121. Brassaï, *Conversations with Picasso*, p. 69.

122. Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, pp. 92-93.

Table 1: Percentage Distributions of Textbook Illustrations over Artists' Careers

Age	20-9	30-9	40-9	50-9	60-9	70-9	80-9	90-9	Total
Artist									
Picasso	35	25	17	14	4	2	2	1	100
Polke	67	7	19	7	0	-	-	-	100
Richter	0	40	7	47	6	0	-	-	100

Source: Picasso: David Galenson, "The Greatest Artists of the Twentieth Century," NBER Working Paper 11899, Table 5.

Polke and Richter: Cory Bell, *Modern Art* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2000); Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, second ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000); David Hopkins, *After Modern Art, 1945-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Martin Kemp, ed., *The Oxford History of Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Bernard Blistene, *A History of 20th-Century Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001); Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945*, new ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001); Klaus Richter, *Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2001); Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960*, new ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002); Amy Dempsey, *Art in the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002); Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, sixth ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002); H.H. Arnason, *A History of Modern Art*, fifth ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004); Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art*, third ed. (New York: Vendome Press, 2004); Pascale Le Thorel-Daviot, *Nouveau Dictionnaire des Artistes Contemporains* (Paris: Larousse, 2004); Gill Perry and Paul Wood, eds., *Themes in Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004); Ingo Walther, ed., *Art of the 20th Century*, 2 vols. (Cologne: Taschen, 2005).