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## Deconstructing Consciousness in Art

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## Deconstructing Consciousness in Art

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Deconstructing Consciousness in Art**

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### Abstract

To the extent that art mirrors consciousness, what does the art of any age have to tell us about where we are as a species and civilization? In this paper, I suggest that modern and postmodern art reveal the tendency toward deconstruction, of our identities, as selves, as cultures, as a civilization. Through this process of deconstruction, there is a space offered to us through the experience of art, of freedom to recreate ourselves, our identities, and our sense of purpose and meaning in the cosmos. Grounding the inquiry in texts from various authors in the field of art history and the philosophy of consciousness, I present examples of art that deconstruct and reinvent, and invite the viewer (of the art) to self-reflect and consider how we may emerge anew from the experience of art. I invite the reader to engage in the same process. I also ask what the art of the current era can tell us about where we are and where we are going as a species.

*Keywords:* Art, commodification, consciousness, deconstruction, evolution, existential crisis, materialism, modern, postmodern, reification, transcendence, transformation

### Deconstructing Consciousness in Art

We dance round in a ring and suppose, But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

*-Robert Frost, The Secret Sits*

It is an age of refiguring. Tearing things apart and reconstructing them. Through the process of deconstruction, a new consciousness emerges in the consideration and witnessing of this state of all things torn apart. What do Jackson Pollack, Marc Chagall, or Pablo Picasso want us to think when we see their paintings if not some sort of deconstruction and reification of the subject and object of the art? Both the viewer and the artist are invited, no forced, to consider what it means to see seemingly meaningless streaks on a canvas and find some value and sense in it, as in Pollack's works, or to see a nose on top of a head and a ram body suspended against a naturescape in a work of Chagall or Picasso. Modern art seems to capture Freudian streams of consciousness as seen in the landscapes of the unconscious in Dali and even Matisse. What the art of this modern to post modern period can tell us is up to interpretation and, if anything, this process is a dance of seeking, reimagining, reinterpreting, reinventing, and aiming to find the truth in the center of it all.

If the exploration of consciousness through the history of art tells us anything, it is that the modern to post modern era is one in which all things are refigured, thrown up into an existential field of disintegration and reification, and reinvented to reflect the state of the human being realizing that God is dead (because we killed him) and our ultimate freedom is also our ultimate responsibility to invest the universe with meaning and make sense of our lives, alone (Nietzsche, 1974). Perhaps art helps us do this: make meaning, make sense, find purpose, and grasp the chaos of being that confronts the mind of humanity in this era.

**Figure 1**

*Marc Chagall's The Bridal Pair with the Eiffel Tower (1939)*



In his book, *The End of Art*, American art critic and poet, known for his practice of psychoanalytic art criticism, Donald Kuspit says that art is over because it has “lost its aesthetic importance. Postart is a new visual category that elevates the banal over the enigmatic, the scatological over the sacred, cleverness over creativity” (Kuspit, 2015, p. 30). This seems to characterize the art of Banksy, whose art as political activism is underscored by unconventional manner of display, as in his *Girl with Balloon* (aka *There is Always Hope*) graffiti art (Banksy, 2004).

**Figure 2***Banky's Girl with Balloon*

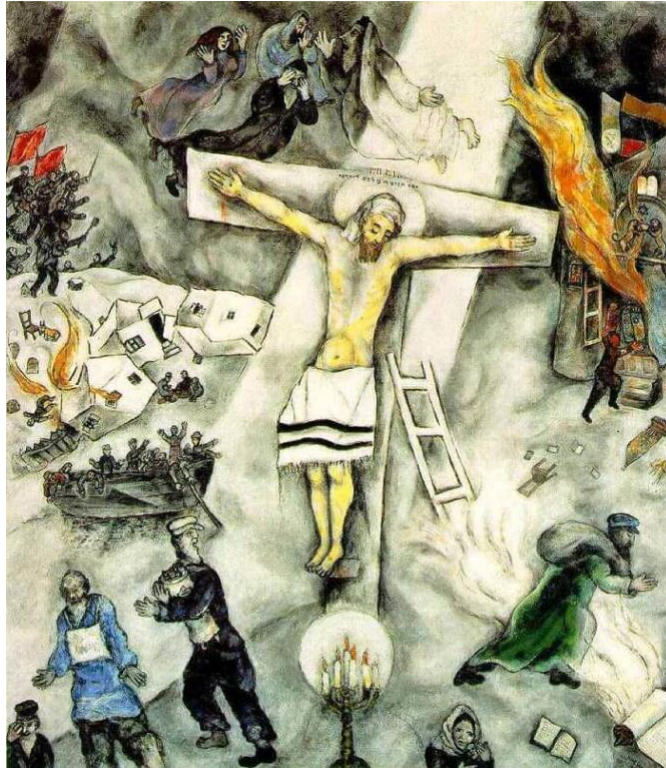
Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, Simon Malpas captures this spirit in his book, *Jean-François Lyotard*, when he says, “postmodern art as anti-elitist and keen to break down the distinctions between high art and popular culture in a way that the modernists were not, playfully subversive of the seriousness of modernist art, and even more formally experimental in terms of their ironic use of a range of materials and styles to communicate. (Malpas, 2002, p. 8). It is as if, by turning the eye toward what we take for granted and turning it upside down into ironical statements, he captures something about this age. “Devaluation is inseparable in modern art and anti-aesthetic to postmodern”, says Kuspit, and where “modern art expressed universal human consciousness, postmodern art degenerates into an expression of narrow ideological interests” (2004, p. 143). The shift from modern to post modern seems to capture this lostness in the zeitgeist in which the over-commodification of everything emerges as the status quo of socio-economic reality and human beings are rounded up and gassed en masse. How can that happen in the modern world? This is an existential crisis that struck the global human consciousness and is reflected in art: a sort of trauma, shock, and existential crisis.

With the role of art as an ergon of human evolution, perhaps it helps us see ourselves and make sense of ourselves. “Aesthetic experience allows one to recover the sense of individuality and authenticity lost to ‘obligatory behavior’”, writes Kuspit (2004, p. 13). Echoing Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Gay Science*, and in his critique of Kant, Kuspit describes a sort of self-realization ergon in the experience of observing art (as beauty, in the Nietzschean sense.) While Kant says that art is created to represent an idea (usually the ideal), Nietzsche says the important moment of art is in the act of observing it, “for the observation of beauty in creations of art throughout the ages evokes a sense of the self in the viewer, exalted in some supra state” (Nietzsche, 1974). Author, professor, and feminist social critic, Camile Paglia quotes Professor of Humanities at Middlebury, Stephen Donadio, who says of Nietzsche (and Henry James) that “the extraordinary emotional investment made by both... in the power of art as the only activity capable of creating values and raising experience from insignificance”. Thus, Paglia says, “the religion of art replaces ordinary religion, and the painting becomes a confession...” (Paglia, 2012, p. 147). Perhaps the artist uses art to express not only their own consciousness, but the collective consciousness of their place and time. You can see this in Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* or Picasso’s *Guernica*.



**Figure 3**

*Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion (1938)*



**Figure 4**

*Pablo Picasso's Guernica (1937)*



Paglia suggests that capitalism transformed art into money, and this captures a further alienation and dehumanization from capitalism (Paglia, 2012, p. 147). This is a way that the power structures grabbed hold of art in the transition to the post-modern era and made art somewhat absurd and inane. Philosopher and linguist, Jean Gebser identified the mental structure of consciousness as “contingent upon dirigibility, the possibility of direction at an opposing antithetical object in confrontation” (Gebser, 1985, p. 87). This mirrors the idea of enantiodromia as a vital step in psychological integration on the journey toward wholeness in Jung. It is only by making conscious that which opposes our well-being (that is, “bringing the shadow to light”) that we can become whole, Jung says (Jung, 1973). Art, in the modern to postmodern era, functions as this process of bringing something into opposition. It helps human beings see themselves and the world in which they live in a more mental, abstracted, and perhaps self-reflexive way. This is how Peter Abbs, writer, poet and educator, and Sussex University’s first professor of creative writing, can say, “In a postmodern age the word metaphysical has to shift its meaning so that it refers not so much to those impossible systems of ultimate explanation but more to the process of questioning and questing which lie behind them” (Abbs, 2006).

Perhaps this is what American author, cultural historian, social critic, and scholar of religion, spirituality, and art, Charlene Spretnak means when she says, in her book *The spiritual in modern art: Art history reconsidered, 1800 to the Present*, “nearly every significant art movement in the modern period emerged partially in response to spiritual issues in the zeitgeist” (Spretnak, 2014, p. 207). Not only the artist, but the observer of the art (and the culture that not only the art, but the experience of the art, reflects) undergoes a shift of consciousness through the art in an existential moment of meaning making. When she talks about “the quest to save

civilization from materialism,” she reveals the idea captured in modern and postmodern art that there is something beyond objective material valuation in art and the consumption of it as the art viewer.

In this new sense, creating and experiencing art can be seen as transformative and transcendent of material value; it evokes a new sense of self in the cosmos, in a sort of Freudian moment in which art is interior and looking at art is looking at what is inside the viewer -the self. Professor and author Leslie Combs notes, in a video lecture for the California Institute of Integral Studies, that Freud influenced art and literature, and you can see that he also influenced art theory. Kandinsky, Combs notes, referred to his works as inner objects, aspects of the mind or inner life, and Matisse saw art as inner subjectivity. I wonder, if art is a mirror of consciousness, and the consciousness of the modern to postmodern era was in a state of absolute flux, what consciousness is captured by the art that being made now, and what does it say about where we are going? We dance ‘round in a ring and suppose, while the truth sits in the center and knows...

### Figure 5

*Henri Matisse's The Dance (1910)*



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