

Chapter 13

Transatlantic Influences on Contemporary Visual Arts

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Thinking about Flemish, Netherlandish, or Germanic art conjures up images by Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Dürer—or maybe Rene Magritte, Piet Mondrian and Kathe Kollwitz. American art brings to mind romantic landscapes by Asher Brown Durand and social landscapes by Thomas Hart Benton. Later works by Georgia O’Keeffe and Andy Warhol are remembered as uniquely American. But what images or ideas are evoked when “contemporary” is the prefix to visual art in Central Europe and the US? What transatlantic influences are at work in contemporary visual art and how can they be explained? Contemporary aesthetics and art theory, contemporary artists and the art they make have all changed the very nature of art collecting and preservation. They have also changed the role of art museums and their curators, along with the strategies that viewers employ in order to understand and appreciate contemporary visual art.

Radical changes in visual art ideas, artists, art works, the role of art museums, curators, collectors and viewers can be explained through examples of transatlantic influences on contemporary art collections in museums such as the Museum of Modern Art Brussels, the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and

Dundee Contemporary Arts in Scotland. The philosophical underpinnings of the contemporary art collection at the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, provides a case study for thinking about the transatlantic influences on contemporary visual art. Its seminal collection is rooted in the work of German artist Joseph Beuys, includes the Belgian French-speaking traditions with the work of Marcel Broodthaers, and develops a direct transatlantic connection between Italian *arte povera* and American Minimalism.

Contemporary art has had an impact on the museum as a cultural institution, the role of the museum curator as presenter and preservationist, and the role of the contemporary art viewer. Since the radical shifts within the contemporary art world during the mid-1960s, curators have been required to think about the preservation, presentation and development of their collections in new ways, and viewers have had to develop new ways of thinking about and viewing visual art.

Contemporary Art Ideas

From a transatlantic perspective, contemporary visual art ideas that come immediately to mind, because they have been so influential to the art of the later part of the 20th century, are those that were born in Fluxus and live on in the work and legacy of German artist, Joseph Beuys. When Fluxus activities began in the late 1950s,

a lot of artists and composers and other people who wanted to do beautiful things began to look at the world around them in a new way (for them). They said: Hey!—coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculptures. A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Fancypants. The sloshing of my foot in my wet boot sounds more beautiful than fancy organ music.¹

Artists began to question, “Why does everything that’s beautiful like cups and kisses and sloshing feet have to be made into a part of something fancier and bigger? Why can’t I just use [these elements] for their own sake?”²

In the early 1960s Fluxus was a ground-breaking and idiosyncratically imaginative *avant garde* movement with a prehistory in experimental music and the concrete poetry of the 1950s and a posthistory in minimalism and the conceptual and performance art of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Although Fluxus began with a series of concerts organized in New York City, it grew into a sort of improvisational clearinghouse for artistic events and activities in

Western Europe, especially in Paris, Copenhagen, and Dusseldorf. The German-American connection was crucial to early Fluxus.³

Fluxus was a vital tradition with significant influences on the aesthetic practices of many subsequent visual art movements and individual artists. It never came close to being a "school" or an art movement in the traditional sense. Perhaps best defined as Neo-Dada, Fluxus activities paved the way for contemporary artists to take new, international directions and adopt transatlantic attitudes.

With a shift in the center of the art world from Paris to New York in the mid-20th century and the domination of American art in Europe, the art world developed several transatlantic contextual strands. American artists strove for independence from the past, particularly from European traditions, and argued for a more theoretical and impersonal attitude. Artists had operated on a more explicitly international level within various groups and collaborative contexts since the mid-20th century and had responded to various past abstract-expressionist and figurative tendencies by seeking new meaning for their work. Contemporary artistic attitudes are resistant to the idea that art works should provide access to a world of beauty, peace and harmony or that an art work can provide direct insight with respect to the artist's subconscious.

Later 20th-century American and European artists took a stance and adopted an attitude that was in direct opposition to the personal and emotional art of the past. These new artistic attitudes changed aesthetics and were more or less synchronous with new ideas whose influences were felt in social and intellectual arenas. These new beliefs were interpreted and carried out in a direct, radical way and reached audiences quickly by means of simple and inexpensive dissemination through publication or performance.⁴ These attitudes led both to a fairly direct form of political art and to criticism of the traditional means and classification of art, which came to be seen as offshoots of a now discredited society. In a radical departure from the heroic projects of previous artists, a new pragmatism was adopted, which preferred to launch its critical assault from within the prevailing order. Those like Fluxus artists who sought a different approach risked being marginalized—seen and heard only to a very limited extent.⁵

In Europe, artists were casting fragments of mass consumption in a repetitive aesthetic model or concealing progressively larger parts of the world, while Americans were tinkering with the fundamental principles of a work of art, attempting to liberate art from all prejudice in the way of aesthetic perception. In order to evade the tyranny of the historically charged view, artists on both sides of the Atlantic did not

consider their objects to be sculptures, or part of the history of sculpture. They attempted to free their work from the traditional interpretive model that sought to project a narrative into the representation (so, for example, they did not title their work). This required the viewer to consider the aesthetic merits of this art in terms of its mass, volume, surface and proportions, thus making the environment a major criterion for designating the object a work of art and defining its special status.⁶

Another late 20th-century transatlantic change was the abandonment of traditional easel painting and pedestal sculpture in favor of a freer manner of presenting art work. No longer hindered by or struggling against previously set norms with regard to the material construction, size and function, artists were experimenting on a large scale. Artists employed new and advanced technical aids or materials such as fast drying acrylic paint, polyester or neon lighting—the idea being that it was an advantage that these elements were not burdened with art historical connotations.⁷

Contemporary Artists and Their Art

Joseph Beuys brought these new positions from the German-American connection of Fluxus to a prominent place in Germanic history and art. Beuys perhaps even foretold the *arte povera* movement and certainly laid the foundation for the work in the prestigious Whitney Biennial 2000, in terms of medium, materials and meaning. The art instructor who became a political activist, founded political parties, used a wide variety of materials and processes to create mysterious and compelling artifacts and performances, and functioned as a poetic social critic and teacher of humanity, appealed greatly to artistic imagination and aesthetic sensibilities.⁸ Beuys expressed the beatific suffering found in Medieval religious paintings, the transcendent expressions in Dürer's engravings, recreated myths, spiritual beliefs and tormented angst of German Expressionism. His art extends beyond historic sources to create a compelling and disturbing contemporary social and aesthetic dynamic.⁹ In Beuys, the art world found a leader whose activities and ideas were admired and imitated. His ideas not only crossed the Atlantic, but they continue to influence the work of artists around the world today.

Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers provides another thread in the transatlantic perspective. With his roots in Surrealism, Broodthaers focused on the relationship between text as image and text as text. He focused on issues with works in which the text was rendered in individual handwriting, giving it pictorial value.¹⁰ Literary in his

orientation, Broodthaers used the relationship that exists between language and image as his instrument for artistic innovation and far-reaching social changes. He raised the issue of the context of cultural institutions. In Broodthaers's world, the interested viewer discovers countless ambiguities behind which the artist seems to take refuge as a poet, a collector, or even as a museum curator. Whereas the works of Beuys bring one into a world full of personal history and passion, with mystical and magical rituals, those of Broodthaers expose mystifications.¹¹

The relationship to the environment, which has acquired importance in contemporary art, extends not only to the exhibition context but to the wider social one as well. Marcel Broodthaers combined his preoccupation with the social function of an art work with spatial installations. For instance, in his installation, *L'Entree de l'Exposition*, visitors are welcomed into elegant surroundings where they can rest for a moment among exotic palms and handsomely framed photographs and screen prints before actually entering the museum to become acquainted with the visual cultures of the centuries. The sophisticated viewer will approach the rest of the collection with a certain sense of uneasiness, however, because the elegant palms partly block the view of the art works, and the photographs and prints actually contain hidden warnings. In *Museum/Museum*, screen prints are part of the installation, and the institution of the museum is linked with imitations, falsifications and a gold standard. The photographs that provide a summary of his previous work as a visual artist show that this warning does not exclude Broodthaers himself.¹²

The work of Beuys and Broodthaers can be seen as the continuation of two important visual cultures: the Northern and Central European culture, in which the personal myth is a binding element, and the French-speaking culture, which is especially influenced by language and literature.¹³ And while we still expect artists such as these to present us with the ethical and aesthetic refinement of their cultures, their art ideas engender a critical-mindedness on the part of both the artist and the viewer towards everything that appears to confirm the existing world. Artists do not produce their work in a vacuum, but they, too, are subject to political and economic power structures and linguistic codes.¹⁴

The art works and ideas of Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, the Italian Luciano Fabro and the American Robert Ryman give evidence of another way of thinking about contemporary art issues as they fit within a contextual framework that establishes transatlantic perspectives on contemporary artistic and aesthetic trends. This

framework was expanded when the Italian *arte povera* movement met a thoroughly different type of art from the US in the mid-1970s—minimal art. *Arte povera* brought a third visual culture to contemporary art: the Southern European and Byzantine cultures, individual and radical, poetic and classical. A fourth visual culture of American minimalism was in direct opposition to the poetic writings of the *arte povera* movement with its impersonal attitude and promotion of the recurrent principal: maximal content through minimal form.

Arte povera was a term first used in exhibitions in Italy in the late 1960s and refers to the materials used in the art work, not to the content. Coal, steel plates, rubber, pieces of burlap and other anti-aesthetic and easily obtained primitive or raw materials are used to make works of art. These materials, free of art historical reference, function as a medium for metaphors. Through the consistent use of a variety of materials in one work, a contrast between nature and culture can be expressed in many *arte povera* works.

A thoroughly individual, radical, and poetic art movement, *arte povera* can be clearly exemplified in the work of Luciano Fabro. In two of Fabro's sculptures, *Prometeo* and *La nascita di Venere*, classical references abound. The title of the works provide interpretive clues. For instance, *Prometeo*, or Prometheus, the Greek Titan, created the first human being out of clay and stolen fire from the gods. The sculpture was made in 1986, the year of the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Nuclear energy, a natural force comparable to the stolen fire of Prometheus, is an uncontrollable force. By way of this sculpture, Fabro suggests that, in comparison to nature, human activities are chaotic, despite attempts at order, and that humans have forces at their disposal that can destroy nature.

Prometeo has a rigid base of eight upright marble pillars from which upside-down surveying markers protrude vertically. Several measuring sticks rest on top of the grayish white marble. The pillars are arranged in an organized fashion, not immediately recognizable as triangular and pentagonal. Despite the materials from which the sculpture is made, sturdy marble pillars and scientific measuring devices, its general appearance is one of instability and disorder: the measuring sticks seem to be lying pointlessly on top of the pillars. Even when the basic geometric forms that make up the piece are recognized, the construction remains an enigma. In the style and materials there are symbolic references that provide an iconographic interpretation.

La nascita di Venere alludes to classical mythology with its title and material, like *Prometeo*. The birth of Venus was often portrayed in classical Greek sculpture. Venus, the goddess of love and fertility, born

from the sea and cast onto land by the waves, bends over on the beach as she wrings the sea-water from her long hair. Created of a pillar of marble and installed in sand, Fabro's work refers to myths that designate primal forces surrounded by mystery and uncertainty. Through titles, materials and the work itself, Fabro evokes the dark and mysterious side of classical mythology to explain the relationships between humans and nature.

Although American minimal art developed at the same time as European neo-constructivism, its influence was far greater and more sustained. The theoretical basis of minimal art, translated by artists trained in art history, was independence from European traditions, an impersonal attitude very different from the *arte povera* writings of the same time. Minimal artists sought to produce non-emotional and non-expressive works of art—art that was pure and consistent. They sought to create maximum content using minimal form. Minimalists had a preference for geometric structures and modular principles. Each component within the work of art was equal in terms of form and value. Industrial techniques and materials, and consequently industrial execution, were favored. Many works were made specifically for galleries and museums, such as wall paintings or light sculptures. Sometimes the work existed only for the length of the exhibition, a precursor of conceptual art. The concepts and design sketches needed for the execution of minimalist works became significant because of the transient nature of the actual work. Works of art were as concrete and as objective as possible. Sculptors Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt are considered, along with painters Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman, to be among the major figures in minimal art.

Robert Ryman's paintings make an interesting example of minimal art and it is represented in the seminal collection of contemporary art at Maastricht's Bonnefantenmuseum. Ryman does not make use of elaborate preliminary studies and models in creating his paintings. As his finished works demonstrate, preliminary studies and models would scarcely be able to portray their most striking quality, which is the relationship of the painting to its immediate environment. Ryman's paintings make use of subtle visual means that only become evident when the installation is carried out properly. In the painting *Journal*, for instance, the reflection of light on the wall behind the painting is an intended result of the way it is made and attached to the wall. Without the utmost precision in installing such works, a great deal of the content and quality of the work would not emerge. The system by which the work is attached to the wall is meant to be obvious. Normally not visible, the metal spacers have been transformed by Ryman into a

compositional element. *Journal* exemplifies Ryman's minimalist desire to create a painting that would both be shallow and lean against the wall, without the painted surface being directly attached to the wall.

Even within the new tendencies that *arte povera* and minimalism brought about, fundamental changes and boundaries are found. Contemporary art history defined this period of "image breaking" so quickly that areas soon became delineated, making new traditions discernible. Robert Ryman's white paintings and Luciano Fabro's marble sculptures became acknowledged as points of reference comparable to such historically-influential works as Pablo Picasso's cubist canvases or Piet Mondrian's neo-plastic paintings.¹⁵

The Role of Contemporary Art Museums, Curators, Collectors and Viewers

Traditionally art history has internalized the ideologies of the dominant cultural centers that have contested authority over the canon of "great" art. This has changed in the last 25 years. The discourses of gender and race have been prominent in the displacement of a canon, as have the reappraisal of art's social origins and a revised view of "peripheral traditions" within Europe itself. The task of contemporary art museums now includes a responsibility to the viewers exercised through looking, living with and criticizing art and the conditions of its making and reception. Curators attempt to create an openness and continuity of dialogue so that museum viewers can freely contribute rather than passively accept the single voice of the authoritarian lecture: "That which is done for itself, which imagines being to the fullest, which requires no *illiminati* but is open to any inquiring and engaged intelligence, is the space of an unbounded meeting."¹⁶ Thus, museums with contemporary art collections are no longer "chambers of aesthetics."¹⁷ They are not, like historical art museums, institutions of cultural elitism or sanctums of an aesthetic removed from daily, lived experiences. Contemporary art museums attempt to collect and preserve objects, organize experiences, clarify looking, make visual ideas understood, sharpen vision and "by the demands which the work makes upon the looking, induce the viewer *to see*."¹⁸

Since the late 19th century, art has oscillated between reliance on the museum and the impetus to establish its social meaningfulness beyond the museum's walls. As formalism faded, in the post-colonial period, the plurality of cultures was asserted, even within the "old cultures" of Europe, and the bonds between artistic practice and the historical circumstances of traditions and existing conditions of production became more apparent.¹⁹ One result is that contemporary museums are

a mass of contradictions. Originally, museums were intended to make available to the public, through exhibitions, the collection of artifacts and curiosities belonging to royalty, the aristocracy or the societies of cultured citizens. It is this public access to collections, which are often not public property today, that is a distinguishing feature of a museum. At the same time, museums are obligated to preserve their collections. These two most important duties of a museum, the preservation of a legacy for future generations and the displaying of artifacts to the general public, validate each other, yet are also in direct conflict with each other. From the preservationist point of view, the collection would best be stored in the dark or at least out of the public's reach. In practice, however, within certain acceptable boundaries, museum objects are exposed to dangers that shorten or directly threaten their survival. Thus, the museum is continually faced with the task of making compromises between its two main functions.²⁰ The curator of contemporary art is confronted with the task of enabling the public to share in the experiences of looking at art works that have not yet been bestowed with historical interpretation while also ensuring that future generations will be able to partake of these works.²¹ Further, contemporary art collections include works of a temporal nature like documentation of Beuys's performance pieces or Broodthaers's text and image pieces, or work made with impermanent materials or specific installation requirements like Fabro's *arte povera* pieces and Ryman's minimalist paintings. Contemporary art collections redefine the role of the museum as a cultural institution, the work of the curator as preservationist, and the viewer as a passive participant in the art viewing experience.

In keeping with the new roles of a contemporary art museum, in 1975 the Bonnefantenmuseum invited Joseph Beuys to explain his ideas about his position as an artist and teacher, as well as his views on the purpose of an art work within what he called the "*Erweiterter Kunstbegriff*" (extended idea of art), by means of an exhibition, a lecture and a discussion. After the installation of the exhibition, Beuys donated all of the displayed documents to the museum. The value of this collection lies not only in its completeness—almost all of the documents from the period 1960 to 1975 are represented—but also in the rareness of many of the publications. By signing the documents Beuys gave them a place in his oeuvre. Their significance as a source of his art work is all the greater due to the disintegration of many autonomous works of art by Beuys. The disappearance of these autonomous works is a consequence of Beuys's disregard for the preservation of materials. "*Aktionen*" (performances) and installations

have, due to their ephemeral nature and material, a limited life span. The consciousness that the works represented, not the archival nature of the materials he used, was of prime importance to Beuys. In the museum's vast collection of documentary works, posters, books and prints by Beuys, one can see how drastically the world of contemporary art has changed.²²

The Bonnefantenmuseum also owns a group of about 400 black and white photographs by Broodthaers and a large number of manuscripts concerning South Limburg²³ dating from 1960-1970. While these photographs are important for the study of Broodthaers's *oeuvre*, the majority of them were produced when he was working as a journalist and poet and not yet as a visual artist. At that time he had not yet found the right form for his largely language-oriented intellectual play on images and words. Broodthaers published curious articles about the landscape and history of Limburg in Brussels magazines and newspapers. Like the documentation of Joseph Beuys, these are not intended to be works of art, but rather as a chronicle of an artist's developing attitude toward the art world.²⁴

Museum curators must necessarily think beyond the preservation of art works and also think in terms of encountering the visual. They think about the psychological and expressive effects of the art work as much as the techniques and materials of the works. They imagine transitions between the works in an exhibition as they create an experience to affect a variety of perceptual, affective and cognitive senses. They work "through visual metaphors, echoes and homologies, between representations, abstractions and traces, in relations of simplicity and complexity between three- and two-dimensions, static and time-based media, and through relationships of content and theme."²⁵ Transitions may create a flow from one work to another or they may be disjunctive and dramatic. These transitions may require the viewer to make imaginative leaps from one work to another as "works assert themselves and define the domain of their power."²⁶

In this light we may see how the Bonnefantenmuseum set out to collect works that played a historically significant role and which represented a later phase of the transatlantic artist's development. Thus, the works in the Bonnefantenmuseum show a synthesis of a given artist's personal traits and the elements that point to new transatlantic developments.²⁷ The central and influential location of the Bonnefantenmuseum—Maastricht, the Netherlands—demands consideration in its impact on contemporary art collection policies adopted by museums in the neighboring areas of Germany and Belgium

and enables this museum to serve particularly well as a case study of transatlantic influences on contemporary art. Other museums within its sphere of influence include the Museum of Modern Art Brussels, one of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Belgium, which houses both historical, modern and contemporary art, the Stedelijk Museum, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Two nearby German museums, the Ludwig Forum in Aachen and the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, focus specifically on contemporary art which also demonstrates the transatlantic nature of their collections, not only with their American Pop Art collections but also with their contemporary photographs and video collections. In addition, the Dundee (Scotland) Contemporary Arts opened on March 19, 1999, with works by a host of contemporary performance and installation artists hearkening to Fluxus, Beuys and Broodthaers and to the more contemporary visual ideas brought about by *arte povera*, American pop art, minimalism and conceptual art.

All of these collections demonstrate that one of the most radical changes in the contemporary art world is the acknowledged responsibility of the museum in mediating the relationship between artists and viewers. A significant consequence of formal innovations like the relinquishment of the frame of the painting and the removal of the pedestal beneath a sculpture is that the viewer must take on a more active relationship with the work of art. The desire to involve the viewer more intensively with the art work has led to artists creating art forms such as installations and environments in which the viewer is completely surrounded by the physical presentation.²⁸ The ideas and art works of contemporary visual artists have led to new works of art and to new ways of thinking about the role of the art museum, the museum curator and the viewer of contemporary art. As I have demonstrated, these developments are rooted in several important perspectives of a transatlantic nature.

¹ Janet Jenkins, ed., *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1993), covers.

² *Ibid.*

³ Andreas Huyssen, "Back to the Future: Fluxus in Context," in Jenkins, 142-50.

⁴ Aloys Van Den Berk, "Contemporary Art," in *Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht* (Maastricht: Bonnefantenmuseum, 1995), 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Frederik Leen, "Contemporary Tendencies," in *The Museum of Modern Art Brussels* (Ludion-Ghent: Credit Communal, 1996), 113-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 291-93.

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- ⁸ Van Den Berk, *passim*.
- ⁹ Howard J. Smagula, *Currents: Contemporary Directions in the Visual Arts* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 217.
- ¹⁰ Leen, 118-19.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Van Den Berk, 291-316.
- ¹⁴ Leen, 113-20.
- ¹⁵ Van Den Berk, 291-316.
- ¹⁶ Euan McArthur, "Seeing Ourselves as Other," in *Dundee Contemporary Arts* (Dundee: Dundee Contemporary Arts, 1999), 15-19.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ²⁰ D. H. Van Wegen, "The Position of the Curator of Contemporary Art: Between Fetish and Score," unpublished manuscript for *Modern Art: Who Cares? The Book*. (Amsterdam: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999).
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Van Den Berk, 291-93.
- ²³ Maastricht is in the Province of Limburg.
- ²⁴ Van den Berk, 296.
- ²⁵ McArthur, 15.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Van den Berk, *passim*.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.