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Post-Digital Strategies of Appropriation

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## Living with Ghosts

### From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art

Jan Verwoert

#### 1. The historic momentum of appropriation, in the 1980s and today.

Appropriation is a common technique in contemporary culture. People appropriate when they make things their own and integrate them into their way of life, by buying or stealing commodities, acquiring knowledge, squatting and so on. Artists appropriate when they adopt imagery, concepts and ways of making art other artists have used at other times to adapt these artistic means to their own interests, or when they take objects, images or practices from popular (or foreign) cultures and re-stage them within the context of their work to either enrich or erode conventional definitions of what an artwork can be. As such, this technique could be described as comparatively timeless, or at least, as being practiced as long as modern society exists. For, ever since labour was divided and the abstract organization of social life alienated people from the way in which they would want to live, appropriation has been a practice of getting back from society what it takes from its members. At the same time, appropriation can be understood as one of the most basic procedures of modern art production and education. To cite, copy and modify exemplary works from art history is the model for developing art practice (neo-)classicist tendencies have always championed. During the last two centuries this model was repeatedly challenged by advocates of the belief that modern individuals should produce radically new art by virtue of their spontaneous creativity. The postmodern critics of this cult of individual genius in turn claimed that it is a gross ideological distortion to portray the making of art as a heroic act of original creation. Instead they advanced the paradigm of appropriation as a materialist model that describes art production as the gradual re-shuffling of a basic set of cultural terms through their strategic re-use and eventual transformation.

Such a general account of appropriation as a common social strategy and basic artistic operation may help to outline some of the overall implications of the concept. What it cannot capture, however, is the specific *momentum* that gives the debates about appropriation their particular focus and urgency in different historical situations. It might appear futile to reconstruct the exact spirit of the moment when in the late 1970s the notion of appropriation emerged in critical discourse alongside the concept of postmodernism to become one of the key contested terms in the debates of the 1980s. Still, to try and picture the historic momentum of this discourse seems urgent, because there is evidence that the situation today has significantly changed. To practice and discuss appropriation in the present moment means something different than it did before and to bring out this specific difference it seems necessary to grasp what was at stake in the late 1970s for a better understanding of what, by contrast, is at stake now. Let me attempt a first sketchy juxtaposition: The cultural experience the discourse of appropriation conveys under the sign of postmodernity is that of a radical temporal incision. It is the experience of the sudden death of modernism and the momentary suspension of historical continuity. The stalemate situation of the cold war seemed to bring modern history to a standstill and freeze the forces of progress in motion. These frozen lumps of dead historical time then became the objects of artistic appropriation. Remember Robert Longo appropriating figures of movie actors cut from freeze frames, with their movements suspended in mid-air and bodies arrested in the momentary poses they happened to assume when the film was stopped. Or Cindy Sherman appropriating the visual language of epic Hollywood cinema to halt and arrest the motion of the moving pictures in isolated still images of female figures locked in a spatial *mise-en-scène* with the timeline gone missing. These works convey an intense sense of an interruption of temporal continuity, a black out of historical time that mortifies culture and turns its tropes into inanimate figures, into pre-objectified, commodified visual material, ready to pick up and use.

Now, imagine the reels of the projectors to suddenly start spinning again. As the freeze frame dissolves into motion and the figures Longo suspended in mid-air crash to the ground as the pain of the blow they received from their invisible opponent registers and propels them forward. Sherman's heroines unwind, begin to speak and confess their story to the camera. You could say that this is what happened after 1989. When the superpowers could no longer hold their breath and the wall was blown down, history sprang to life again. The rigid bipolar order that had held history in a deadlock dissolved to release a multitude of subjects with visa to travel across formerly closed borders and unheard histories to tell. Their testimonies went straight down on digital videotape. The dead elegance of the Cibachrome print was replaced by the grungy live look of real-time video footage as the signature aesthetic of the new decade. The Cold War had frozen time and mapped it on space as it fixed the historical situation after World War II for over four decades in the form of a territorial order of rigid geopolitical frontiers. It is from this map that a manifold of asynchronous temporalities now begin to emerge along the faultlines drawn by the geopolitical regimes of modernity. Wars erupt over territories that were shaped on the drawing room tables around which the emerging world powers gathered to divide the globe among themselves. While some countries anticipate a global future by simulating the arrival of the information age, the outsourcing of manual labour from these countries forces other societies back in history to the times and realities of exploitation of early industrialization. In many countries, including possibly the US, social life is organized by two governmental technologies that should exclude, but in fact reinforce each other: the modern secular state and pre-modern theocracy. Religion, a force thought to be crushed and buried under the profanities of capitalism and atheist doctrines of socialism, has resurfaced as a thing of the past that shapes the present.

If we accept this sketchy account as a preliminary description of the current historical condition, it becomes clear that a key difference between the situation at the end of the 1970s and today is that the axes of space and time have shifted into a different angle in relation to each other. The standstill of history at the height of the Cold War had, in a sense, collapsed the temporal axis and narrowed the historical horizon to the timeless presence of material culture, a presence that was further heightened by the imminent prospect that the bomb could wipe everything out any day anyway. To appropriate the fetishes of material culture, then, is like looting empty shops on the eve of destruction. It's the final party before doomsday. Today, on the contrary, the temporal

axis has sprung up again, that is, not one of them but a whole series of temporal axes that cross the axis of global space at irregular intervals. Historical time is again of the essence, only that this historical time is not the linear and unified timeline of steady progress imagined by modernity, but a multitude of competing and overlapping temporalities born from the local conflicts that the unresolved predicaments of the modern regimes of power still produce. The political space of the globe is mapped on a surreal texture of criss-crossing time-lines. (In this sense, the question “*Que horas sont a Washington?*” put forward by Manu Chao, is the formula that sums up the current momentum. It does so through the purposeful misconstruction of the question in the plural—that is through a moment of a-grammaticality Deleuze described as crucial to a formula of resistance, such as that pronounced by Bartleby, the scrivener.)

The challenge of the moment is therefore to re-think the meaning of appropriation in relation to a reality constituted by a multiplicity of spatialized temporalities. The point of departure for such considerations—and also the reason why appropriation remains relevant as a critical (art) practice—is the undiminished if not increased power of capitalist commodity culture to determine the shape of our daily reality. The force that underlies the belief in the potential of appropriation is the hope that it should be possible to cut a slice out of the substance of this commodity culture to expose the structures that shape it in all their layers. It is also the hope that this cut might, at least partially, free that slice of material culture from the grip of its dominant logic and put it at the disposal of a different use. The practical question is then where the cut must be applied on the body of commodity culture and how deep it must go to carve out a chunk of material that, like a good sample, shows the different temporalities that overlie each other like strata in the thick skin of the commodity’s surface. The object of appropriation in this sense must today be made to speak not only of its place within the structural order of the present material culture but also of the different times it inhabits and the different historical vectors that cross it. So there is a positive hope that the exhibition of the appropriated object could today still create this sudden moment of insight that we know it can produce ever since Duchamp put a bottle dryer on display in a museum, namely that it could show what (in a particular social context at a specific historical moment) it means for something to mean something. So we trust the appropriated object to be able to reveal in and through itself the riddled historical relations and dynamics that today determine what things mean.

The only thing we should maybe be less optimistic about is the possibility of thinking of the object of appropriation and the knowledge it generates *in terms of property*. No doubt, if you solely map the act of appropriation on a structural topography of social space there is little room for ambiguity concerning issues of property: In the moment of its expropriation the object is taken away (bought, stolen or sampled) from one place and put to use in another. There may be quarrels over copyright and property rights violations, but those occur precisely because it can generally be traced where the object was taken from and where it is now, whose property it was and who took it to make it a part of his or her life, art, music and so on. Property is an issue because the position of the appropriated item can clearly be fixed (We found it your house, on your record, in your show!). If you however, try to fix the position of the object of appropriation in *time* and draw the trajectory of its displacement in a coordinate system with multiple temporal axes, it obviously gets more complicated. How would you clarify the status of ownership of something that inhabits different times, that travels through time and repeats itself in unpredictable intervals, like for instance, a recurring style in fashion, a folkloristic symbol that is revived by a new political movement to articulate its revisionist version of a country’s history or a complex of second rate modernist architecture occupied by residents who know nothing of its original designs but still have to find a way of living with the ghosts that haunt the building. Who owns a recurring style, a collective symbol or a haunted house? Even if you appropriate them, they can never be entirely your private property. Dead objects can circulate in space and change owners. Things that live throughout time cannot, in any unambiguous sense, pass into anyone’s possession. For this reason they must be approached in a different way. Tactically speaking, the one who seeks to appropriate such temporally layered objects with critical intent—that is with an attitude that differs significantly from the blunt revisionism of neo-(or ‘turbo’-)folkloristic exploitations of the past—must be prepared to relinquish the claim to full possession, loosen the grip on the object and call it forth, invoke it rather than seize it.

## 2. From allegory to invocation

So my claim is that the specific difference between the momentum of appropriation in the 1980s and today lies in a decisive shift in the relation to the object of appropriation—from the re-use of a dead commodity fetish to the invocation of something that lives through time—and, underlying this shift, a radical transformation of the experience of the historical situation, from a feeling of a general loss of historicity to a current sense of an excessive presence of history, a shift from not enough to too much history or rather too many histories. To bring out this difference more clearly, allow me to retrace the steps of the argument and start over from its beginning by calling up some of the theoretical concepts that gave appropriation a specific meaning in the American art-critical discourse of the late 1970s and early 1980s, to then develop some contemporary re-formulations of these ideas.

If you compare, for instance the writings of Douglas Crimp, Fredric Jameson and Craig Owens on the subject of appropriation, you will find a common motif in these texts. It is the idea that the sudden dissolution of historical continuity charges postmodern material with an intense sense of a presence without historical meaning—and that this intensity can be isolated in the object of appropriation as it manifests the breakdown of signification by exposing the empty loop in which the means to make meaning are spinning in and around themselves. In arguably the most beautiful lines of his essay *Pictures* (1979) Crimp, for instance, evokes the feeling of being spellbound by the silence of appropriated images, by their insistence to remain mute and foreclose historical narratives. He describes the experience of these pictures as marked by “the duration of a fascinated, perplexed gaze, whose desire is that they disclose their secrets; but the result is only to make the pictures all the more picture-like, to fix forever in an elegant object our distance from the history that produced these images. That distance is all that these pictures signify.”<sup>1</sup> A similar moment of melancholy, an acknowledgment of the impossibility to grasp history in its images, makes itself felt in the admission Jameson’s made in his essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1982) that “we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach.”<sup>2</sup> All we can

do, Jameson concludes, since the historical depth of the signs we have at our hands is irreversibly voided, is “to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.”<sup>3</sup>

This idea of art as a form of “speech in a dead language” (as Jameson defines pastiche)<sup>4</sup> is then further refined by Craig Owens in his essay *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism*<sup>5</sup> (1980) where he frames speaking a dead language, or rather speaking a language that testifies to the death or dying of its historical meaning, as the language of allegory. Owens summarizes Walter Benjamin’s account of why allegory became the predominant mode of articulating a sense of culture in decay in the German baroque tragic drama in writing that “from the will to preserve the traces of something that was dead, or about to die, emerged allegory.”<sup>6</sup> By analogy Owens then infers that the historical momentum of postmodernity, as the modern baroque, lies in the potential to use allegory as a rhetoric form to capture the experience of the present that the historical language of modernism is dead and in ruins. He understands allegory as a composite sign made up of a cluster of dead symbols which are collaged together to create a shabby composition, a signifier in ruins that exposes the ruin of signification. By defining allegory as a collage of appropriated imagery, Owens in reverse characterizes contemporary art practices of appropriation as producing allegories of the present ruinous state of the historic language of modern art.

The melancholy exercise of speaking or contemplating a dead language in the moment of its allegorical appropriation, however, also delivers a particular kick. Crimp analyses the practice of working with appropriated images as driven by the fetishist desire to get a morbid joy out of the devotion to an opaque artefact: “Such an elaborate manipulation of the image does not really transform it; it fetishizes it. The picture is an object of desire, the desire for the signification that is known to be absent.”<sup>7</sup> Jameson draws on another form of neurotic pleasure to describe the intensity of experiencing the breakdown of signification in the moment of encountering the isolated object of appropriation: He uses schizophrenia as a model to outline the postmodern condition of historical experience. According to Jameson, schizophrenia implies a loss of the mental capacity to perceive time as ongoing in a consistent order, which results in the inability to organize experiences in coherent sequences that would allow them to make sense, which in turn generated a heightened sense of the visceral and material presence of the isolated fragments of perception. He writes that “as temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and ‘material’: the world comes before the schizophrenic with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect, glowing with hallucinatory energy.”<sup>8</sup> Like Crimp, Jameson frames a symptomatic moment in which the individual experiences the breakdown of historical interpretation in the face of an opaque artifact as an ambivalent sensation of depression and ecstasy. So, what for Jameson is the quintessential postmodern experience is for Crimp the particular kick appropriation art delivers.

All of these thoughts revolve around an experience of death, the certain death of modernity and the sense of history it implied, an experience of death that is framed and fixed by the object of appropriation through the accumulation of the dead matter of hollowed out signs in the form of allegory, the ruin of language. That these terms sound like the vocabulary of gothic novels, is certainly no coincidence, since the invocation of a sense of gloom seems to have been a key moment in the discourse of postmodernism. It is, however, a gothic novel written in denial of the implications of the atmosphere it conjures up, namely the suspicion that the dead might actually not be as dead as they are declared to be and that they might actually return as revenants to walk amongst the living. Through its relentless repetition the evocation of the emptiness of the signifier and the death of historical meaning comes to sound like a mantra, a spell to keep away the spectres of modern history that linger on the margins of the postmodern discourse. The re-emergence of a multiplicity of histories in the historic moment of the 1990s, then, resembles the return of these ghosts to the centre of the discourse and equals the sudden realization that the signs do speak as multiple echoes of historic meaning begin to reverberate in their hollow body—the insight that what was deemed dead speech has indeed manifest effects on the lives of the living.

This shock of the unsuspected return of meaning to the arbitrary sign is pictured in the climatic scene of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). In a stormy night, the narrator recounts, he tried to comfort and calm his host, the lord of the house of Usher, who is plagued by nervous hypersensitivity and an immense sense of anxiety, by reading a fanciful chivalrous romance to him. Instead of distracting the attention from the surrounding reality, however, the words of the story are in fact answered by immediate echoes in the real world:

At the termination of this sentence I started, and for a moment paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described.<sup>9</sup>

It turns out that the literary account of a knight breaking into a dragon’s horde is step by step echoed in the real world by the literal procedure of the un-dead twin sister of the Count of Usher breaking out of the tomb in which she was buried alive to come and take her brother to the shadows with her. It is this sudden realization that words and images, as arbitrarily construed they may be, produce unsuspected effects and affects in the real world which could be said to mark the momentum of the 1990s. A key consequence of this momentum is the shift in the critical discourse away from a primary focus on the arbitrary and constructed character of the linguistic sign towards a desire to understand the performativity of language and grasp precisely how things are done with words, that is, how language through its power of interpellation and injunction enforces the meaning of what it spells out and, like a spell placed on a person, binds that person to execute what it commands.

In the light of this understanding the aim of appropriation can no longer be analysis alone, quite simply because the effects of staging an object of appropriation can no longer be contained to in a moment of mere contemplation. When you call up a spectre, it will not content itself with being inspected, it will require active negotiations to accommodate the ghost and direct its actions or at least keep them in check. By the same token, if we understand the evocation of a concept, image or object in the moment of its appropriation and exhibition to have manifest and potentially unsuspected effects on the real world, to isolate,

display and, as it were fix this concept, image or object in the abstract space of pure analysis is no longer enough. To acknowledge the performative dimension of language means to understand the responsibility that comes with speaking to engage in the procedures of speech and face the consequences of what is being said. To utter words for the sake of analysis already means to put these words to work. You cannot test a spell. To utter it is to put it into effect. In this sense, an art of appropriation understood as invocation must concern itself even more with the practicalities and material gestures performed in the ceremony of invocation. This concern for practicalities simultaneously raises the question to what ends the ceremony is performed, that is, with which consequences the object of appropriation is put to its new use. This is a question of practical ethics: With what attitude should appropriation be practiced? Would it be acceptable for a critical art practice to give in to the power of the performative alone and invoke the ghosts of historic visual languages to command them to work for the interests of the living?

There is ample evidence that this is precisely what public address experts do these days anyway. Every orchestrated retro-trend or revisionist resurrection of nationalist histories sees hordes of ghosts pressed into the service of the market and other ideological programs. So, to resist the urge to master the ghosts by programming the effects of appropriation seems like a better alternative. This is always assuming that it were actually possible at all to master ghosts, while the uncanny quality of an encounter with them after all lies precisely in the fact that in the relationship with a spectre and the one who invokes it who controls whom will always remain dangerously ambiguous and the subject of practical struggle. This brings us back to the questionable status of property in the act of appropriation discussed before. If through appropriation one seeks to (re-)possess an object, what then if that object had a history and thus a life of its own? Would the desire for possession then not inevitably be confronted by a force within that object which resists that very desire? In his book *Spectres of Marx* (1994) Derrida describes this moment of ambiguity and struggle as follows:

One must have the ghost's hide and to do that, one must have it. To have it, one must see it, situate it, identify it. One must possess it without letting oneself be possessed by it, without being possessed of it (...). But does not a spectre consist, to the extent that it consists, in forbidding or blurring this distinction? In consisting in this very indiscernability? Is not to possess a spectre to be possessed by it, possessed period? To capture it, is that not to be captivated by it?<sup>10</sup>

On the grounds of this observation, that the relation between the ghost and the one who invokes it will remain in a precarious state of limbo, Derrida then develops an ethics, that is, he formulates the task to find ways to practically approach and do things with ghosts that would do justice to the complex nature of their presence and relation to us. The task is to 'learn to live *with* ghosts'<sup>11</sup> and this means to learn 'how to let them speak or how to give them back speech'<sup>12</sup> by approaching them in a determined way that still remains undetermined enough to allow them to present themselves:

To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who could no longer be *revenants*, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome—without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*.<sup>13</sup>

It seems that this ethical maxim could equally serve as a practical guide to appropriation today. If we assume that horizon of our historical experience today is defined by the ambiguous influences and latent presence of the unresolved histories, the ghosts, of modernity, then an act of appropriation that seeks to show what it means for something to mean something today must expose these unresolved moments of latent presence as they are, and that means first of all, not to suggest their resolution in the moment of their exhibition. Appropriation then is about performing the unresolved by staging object, images or allegories that invoke the ghosts of unclosed histories in a way that allows them to appear as ghosts and reveal the nature of the ambiguous presence. And to do that is first of all a question of finding appropriate ways of going through the practicalities of the performance of evocation, that is: a question of practice.

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- 1 Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art New York, in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., Boston 1984), 77. Reprinted from *October*, no.8 (1979): 75–88.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 118.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 114.
- 5 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art New York, in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., Boston 1984), 35. Reprinted from *October*, no.12 (1980): 67–86 and no.13 (1980): 59–80.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 7 *Op. cit.*, 183.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, 120.
- 9 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 85–101; here: 98.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, & The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 132.
- 11 *Ibid.*, xviii.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 175.

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