

Short Essay Response 1

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In the late 1970s and early 1980s America and Germany produced artists heavily concerned with culture and history. These artists were eager to shed the pressure of modernism and step into feeling, commentary and expression. The artists Cindy Sherman and Jorg Immendorff provided work in very different mediums with a similar questioning distaste for elements of their respective cultures.

Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" are a particularly powerful commentary on the grotesque glamorization of everyday life through film and Hollywood. That glamorization has had implication as to the image and role of women in culture. Through her black and white self portraits, she seems to say "see, anyone could be this glamorous, but only for a moment." It was a series of still photos after all. She stopped the series "when she ran out of clichés."¹ Without the cliché, there was no real work of art.

Jorg Immendorff provided a commentary on the past and present culture in Germany with an eye to future events. In his Café Deutschland series he combined many different icons in a sea of expression. In his works he references divide of East and West Germany, the demise of Hitler and the artist himself as a spectator in all of it. He seems to say "Things need to change, but I'm not sure what can be done. I'm just a painter but I have all these ideas, icons and influences swirling around in my head which must be expressed."

These artists are representative of a breed of postmodern "throwbacks" who released themselves from the confines of modernism. Post modernity is not a relapse into an obsolete past but rather a skin-shed of the aesthetic as god and a reintroduction of history, expression, representation and meaning in art. In fact, to say that historic works, or their language, are obsolete seems to be quite conceited. These artists declare that we must remember the past, respond to it, and honor it if we are to move forward in any meaningful fashion.

Immendorff's work begged the German to come to terms with the influences and icons of their culture - dirty history of Nazism and Hitler, the separation of East and West Germany. Without the context of Germany, the knowledge of the past and then present states, the paintings he produced would not make any sense. The paintings must have the culture to be relevant. In the same way Sherman's Untitled Film Stills must have Hollywood in all of its glamour, glitz and idealism to be understood. Without the cultural context there is no questioning, no commentary - she's simply posing for self portraits.

In arguing the importance of context, one might humbly submit a fragment of a conversation – the word “Yes.” Is it possible for anyone outside the conversation to correctly interpret the meaning of that phrase without the context of the conversation? Absolutely not. To judge the work of any artists, one must take into account the historic timeline leading up to the work, the background of the artist and the culture in which it was made. Even those artists involved in Modernism must be judged in context. Without context, there is no way to judge a movement or specific artist with any grace. Without context we cannot understand. These artists lived on context.

Notes

¹ Galassi, Peter. "MoMA.org | Interactives | Exhibitions | 1997 | Cindy Sherman." MoMA | The Museum of Modern Art. <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1997/sherman/index.html> (accessed January 26, 2010).

Cindy Sherman
Untitled Film Still #13
1978



Jörg Immendorff
Café Deutschland
1984