

Be with the Trouble

Cultural Appropriation in America

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“Now art is all about being constructed out of relationships between parts.”

— Laura Owens¹

If we take what Laura Owens intended to be a comment on the formal, material process of art-making today and read it as a social, cultural, and political description, we find a key to the American debate over cultural appropriation. Controversies such as those over Kelley Walker at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Dana Schutz at the Whitney Museum, or Sam Durant at the Walker Art Center signal the arrival of a new era. Recent outrage over cultural appropriation has traumatized people on all sides: Museum officials have resigned, artists have received death threats, viewers have been moved to petition for the destruction of artworks. The relationships between parts are troubled. How did we get here?

During the late 1970s and 80s artists introduced formal, material appropriation as a critical, transformative tool; this moment also happened to be the dawn of neoliberalism and identity politics. Today all three are in extremis: Digitally-enhanced neoliberalism is reaching its cruel limits, a new and reactionary kind of identity politics has taken shape, and appropriation in art now primarily implies cultural appropriation. I want to consider some of the ways these three historical figures are intertwined.

In the art context the term appropriation has traditionally referred to an empowering critical tool involving the guerrilla displacement of images. In the late 1970s and early 80s artists established this now ubiquitous gesture of copying with an aim to fragment and dislocate. Appropriation interfered with dominant representations and challenged the power structures implicit in images from art and art history, as well as from the commercial and popular material of what the Frankfurt School called “culture industry”.

Appropriation was a theft from power.

Decades later the implication of artistic appropriation has been turned on its head, and the presumed theft from power has turned into a presumed theft from the oppressed. According to “Merriam Webster”, appropriation means unlawfully taking from a rightful owner “under the guise of authority”, a phrase which may be taken as a pointed euphemism for the injustices of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In this sense, appropriation is a red thread going through the entire history of dispossession, oppression, and marginalization. Current outrage is aimed at the naiveté with which (white) artists are taking images from other cultures or peoples.

The tactic of artistic appropriation was to shift emphasis from original to copy, thus privileging context; this may be considered the primal scene for today’s conundrum because the tactic was so successful that it became part of the toolbox for advertising and branding, while appropriation art itself moved from the margins into the museum. Appropriation is still a kind of theft, but its own context has changed. Take, for example, Sam Durant’s caustic anti-monument *Scaffold* (2012), which comprises seven historical gallows used in hangings sanctioned by the U.S. government between 1859 and 2006. When exhibited at the Walker Art Center, people of the local Dakota tribe maintained that the work violated their dignity with its implicit reference to the Mankato massacre of 38 Dakota men, and the sculpture was dismantled. The controversy doesn’t reveal the failure of one artist or museum so much as expose a systemic failure of representation, or what Durant called the “incredible disconnect between the art world and the rest of the world”.²

I want to point out that it is the museum that is the interface between those two worlds. Notably, the controversial artworks by Durant, Durham, Schutz, and Walker had all been previously exhibited, without controversy, before being brought to American museums. Homi Bhabha has suggested that “we can never quite control these acts [of cultural appropriation] and their signification. They exceed intention.”³ Everyone grasps that a museum exists to unite different parts within a master narrative, a narrative synonymous with cultural power. Perhaps it is partly this hegemonic cut and paste—an apparent appropriation—that foregrounds that which exceeds the artists’ intentions.

Both appropriation art and much post-colonial thinking emerged from the momentum of post-structuralism with its anti-essentialism and pursuit of coded hierarchies and fixed meanings. In this light, there is a shared history. Gregg Bordowitz remembers that “in the early 1980s, appropriation was understood as a tactic of counterculture—in art, but also in a larger counter-culture encompassing left-wing liberation struggles over race, gender, sexuality.”⁴ Coco Fusco recalls an “evolving debate that actually began in the late 1970s in relation to the establishment of minority cultural spaces and ethnic studies, then moved into discussions of black feminism and black masculinity, before merging with a multiplicity of debates in the 1980s—relating to institutional critique, postmodernism, feminism etc.”⁵ For Fusco, the “crisis of identity” was a symptom of a decentering of conceptual and ideological frameworks that had given people a sense of rootedness in their world. Identity “was addressed as a term to be analyzed from many angles,”⁶ not simply two opposing sides, as is common practice with today’s us versus them. However, if initially identity politics was about forming a community to achieve visibility in demanding civil rights, today its essentializing claims often seem to shore up existing structures of capital and power. Rather than breaking down borders, discrimination, fear of others, and other forces of separation, in order to demand equality, it shuts down dialogue and rewards self-singularization. As Fred Moten observed, “individuation is the incarceration of difference.”⁷

Sarah Schulman has lamented the repression of conflict and difference in a neoliberal culture which enforces “this idea you’re supposed to be open and available, liking things, minimizing conflict.”⁸ In her influential book *Conflict Is Not Abuse* Schulman writes: “The force that takes conflict and misrepresents it as abuse is called escalation. Escalation is a kind of smokescreen to cover up the agent’s own influence on events, their own contributions to the conflict. [...] Escalation under these circumstances is a resistance to self-knowledge.”⁹ This resistance to self-knowledge—be it out of cowardice, fear, anger, or resignation—haunts the cultural appropriation debates. Calls for the destruction of artworks, death threats, and refusals to engage in dialogue are all forms of escalation which seek to avoid being with the trouble and the pursuit of a deeper self-knowledge. Culture’s most interesting creative achievements occur in the liminal space of overlap and difference; culture is relational, and not solely a history of domination.¹⁰ As Edouard Glissant urged, “Consent not to be a single being!”¹¹

Friends tell me: Don’t write about cultural appropriation, you’ll get in trouble. But why is it that we cannot now be with the trouble? Part of it may be traced to some of the issues highlighted by both early artistic appropriation and nascent identity politics: our age’s anxiety around copy and original, and the corresponding importance of context. In the intervening years these issues have only sharpened. Neoliberalist policies and digital technologies have brought us to a state of digital liquidity where everything is endlessly duplicated, shared, disseminated, and decontextualized. Copying is the state of Western culture now, its dominant feature, reaching all areas of life, grounded in the contemporary omnipresence of networks. In social media we are all copied and reproduced. You could even say there is no longer such a thing as a copy, as Seth Price proposed in *Was ist Los?* (2003). But when there is no copy, what is an original? Thus the new digital anxiety: How to grasp and retain control over what is deeply yours and yours and what, nevertheless, you possess only fleetingly—your culture, your image, your style, your habits and mannerisms, your history, and your sorrows.

Culture has always been about belonging, through shared rituals and ways of remembering, often in relation to objects or communal gatherings. While this used to take place in person, technological development has largely pushed culture and belonging into the digital arena. Hito Steyerl argues that “the thing formerly called real life has already become deeply imaged.”¹² For Steyerl, the artist’s task now lies in finding different forms of circulation. In art, value has shifted unstoppably toward the many ways to recall, annotate, personalize, edit, authenticate, display, mark, transfer, and engage a work. We need to move information, manage it, parse it, organize it, and distribute it. As Laura Owens put it, referring to the incorporation of methods and images with prior uses, art is now constructed out of relationships between parts. Parts may be taken to refer to images; their reproduction methods; that which they communicate; their cultural reference points; the ways they signify differently to different people. Art points to a relationship between the stages that images, copies, and representations go through. Art engages the question of what images are made of, what state they are in. Today art necessarily traces, houses, or performs the disquieting shifts and instabilities within images that haunt our daily life. In this sense, it’s not realistic not to appropriate: An artist must tackle appropriation if she wishes to deal with culture and how it works. Of course, cultural appropriation itself is in some ways simply a recirculation of images. So what kind of storytelling can adapt to the technological novelty and vastness of the database as archive, while remaining in touch with specific, localized sensibilities and the histories of particular images?

Art is a traffic in symbols and images, and it has never been politically or historically neutral. We should face the abyss brought out by art’s traffic in symbols. We cannot, in Schulman’s words, hide behind the smoke screen of escalation, as confusing and painful—or ostensibly distracting—as the chasm may be. In conclusion I would quote Zadie Smith: “I do not find discussions on appropriation and representation to be in any way trivial. [...] The solution remains as it has always been: Get out (of the gallery) or go deeper in (to the argument).”¹³

[1] Laura Owens (quoted by Peter Schjeldahl), “The Radical Paintings by Laura Owens,” *The New Yorker*, Oct. 30, 2017.

[2] Devon Van Houten Maldonado, “Sam Durant Speaks About the Aftermath of His Controversial Minneapolis Sculpture,” *Hyperallergic* (July 14, 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/390552/sam-durant-speaks-about-the-aftermath-of-his-controversial-minneapolis-sculpture> (<https://hyperallergic.com/390552/sam-durant-speaks-about-the-aftermath-of-his-controversial-minneapolis-sculpture>) (accessed on Jan. 10, 2018).

[3] Homi Bhabha (roundtable participant), “Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable,” *Artforum* (summer 2017): 270.

[4] Gregg Bordowitz (roundtable participant), “Cultural Appropriation: A Roundtable,” *Artforum* (summer 2017): 269.

[5] Coco Fusco, “Decades of Identity Politics,” *Texte zur Kunst* (Sept. 2017): 114.

[6] Fusco, 118.

[7] Fred Moten, “Black and Blur: Fred Moten in Conversation with Arthur Jafa,” (discussion) The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, Dec. 11, 2017.

[8] Sarah Schulman in conversation with Caroline Busta and Anke Dyes, “True and False Victims,” *Texte zur Kunst* (Sept. 2017): 50.

[9] Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 139.

[10] Cf. Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[11] Quoted by Fred Moten as the title of his forthcoming trilogy, the first of which is *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[12] Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation, “Techniques of the Observer,” *Artforum* (May 2015): 338–341.

[13] Zadie Smith, “Getting In and Out: Who Owns Black Pain?” *Harper’s Magazine* (July 2017), <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out> (<https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out>) (accessed on Jan. 10, 2018).

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