It is clear, in short, that postmodernism as I have explained it — not the postmodernism of pluralism, but the postmodernism that seeks to problematize the relations of art and culture — is itself problematic. It swims in the same seas as the art marketplace, yet claims to have an oppositional stance toward that marketplace. It attempts to critique our culture from inside that culture, believing that no 'outside' position is possible. It rejects the notion of the avant garde as one of the myths of modernism, yet in practice it functions as an avant garde. And its linkage to linguistic and literary theory means that its critical rationale tends to value intellect more than visual analysis. But for all that, it has captured the imagination of a young generation of artists. And the intensity of the reactions to postmodernist art suggests that it is more than simply the latest fashion in this year's art world.

Many people, photographers among them, view postmodernism with some hostility, tinged in most cases with considerable defensiveness. I suspect that the problem for most of us with the idea of postmodernism is the premise that it represents a rupture with the past, with the traditions of art that most of us grew up with and love. But it is only through considerable intellectual contortions that one can postulate so clean a break. One has to fence in modernism so tightly, be so restrictive about its practice, that the effort hardly seems worthwhile. So perhaps, contra Crimp, we can find a way to conceive of postmodernism in a way that acknowledges its evolution from modernism but retains its criticality.

One of the ways we might do this is by shifting the ground on which we define postmodernism from questions of style and intention to the question of how one conceives the world. Postmodernist art accepts the world as an endless hall of mirrors, as a place where all we are is images, as in Cindy Sherman's world, and where all we know are images, as in Richard Prince's universe. There is no place in the postmodern world for a belief in the authenticity of experience, in the sanctity of the individual artist's vision, in genius or originality. What postmodernist art finally tells us is that things have been used up, that we are at the end of the line, that we are all prisoners of what we see. Clearly these are disconcerting and radical ideas, and it takes no great imagination to see that photography, as a nearly indiscriminate producer of images, is in large part responsible for them.

Notes


2 In his classic text, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*, Newhall uses the technological development of the medium as a model for describing its esthetic tradition. In other words, by his account the artistic practice of photography progresses in an ascending curve from its primitive beginnings to an apotheosis in the High Modernism of the 1930s. As a result, in his 1983 revision of the history (Museum of Modern Art, New York) Newhall is unable to account coherently for photography's path since. Anything after Weston and Cartier-Bresson is, in his eyes, *prima facie* post.

3 I have been unable to ascertain a 'first use' of the term *Post modern*, which is also encountered as *Postmodern* or *Post-modern*, but it almost certainly dates from the late 1960s. In architecture, it is most often associated with Robert Venturi, the advocate.


8 Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 96.

9 Ibid., 108.

10 Ibid., 129–30.


12 ‘If we were to ask what the art of the 70s has to do with all of this, we could summarize it very briefly by pointing to the pervasiveness of the photograph as a means of representation. It is not only there in the obvious case of photo-realism, but in all those forms which depend on documentation—earthworks . . ., body art, story art—and of course in video. But it is not just the heightened presence of the photography itself that is significant. Rather it is the photograph combined with the explicit terms of the index.’ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Notes on the Index: Part 1,’ October 3 (Spring 1977): 78.


14 See, for example, Douglas Crimp’s essay ‘Appropriating Appropriation,’ in the catalogue Image Scavengers (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1982), 33.


16 A more elaborated and political view of art photography’s waning dominion can be found in Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s ‘Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism,’ New Mexico Studies in the Fine Arts, reprinted in Exposure 23:1 (Spring 1985): 5–15, cf. Ch. 17 in this volume, pp. 152–163, [Ed.].

17 Baudrillard, Simulations, 51.

18 For further evidence of photographic imagery’s impact on Pop and concurrent movements see the catalogue to the show ‘Blam,’ organized by the Whitney Museum, which surveyed the art of the sixties.
