

In an age of historical amnesia, media spin, photo hoaxes, and dilute art criticism, what passes as innovation in the art world's parlance is, to say the least, questionable. What, then, qualifies as "the inventive," particularly in an experimental system such as visual art? If the practice of art is seen as a dynamic of changing attitudes, perspectives, and aesthetic desires, artists might well turn to George Kubler's notion of "prime objects" for one generative answer.<sup>1</sup> Prime objects, in Kubler's formula-

**Suzanne Anker**

## Prime Objects and Body Doubles

tion, may be considered the material by-products of alternative propositions that have been previously neither stated nor possible. Are such speculative solutions the creative engines often driving the ontological structure of objects, works of art included? Or to pose the question in more cynical guise, do such interrogative suppositions even matter at a time when "art fairs are the new disco"?<sup>2</sup>

Kubler posits an analysis of art in terms of influx and output, a pulsating system revealing the shape of time. Not content to discuss divisions in style as an overarching methodology in his theory, he instead examines the evolution of formal eruptions within a systemic flow of duration. Reconsidering the more traditional conception of art history in biological metaphors, such as style considered as a type of species, or developments explained as growth patterns, Kubler instead turns to the physical sciences for his metaphorical model of art history. In this model he cites Michael Faraday's electrodynamics as a system of impulses, relay points, and their sequences operating as time-based elements.<sup>3</sup> With this schema for articulating the hidden, yet perceptible relations between objects and processes, it is no wonder that the conceptualist, Minimalist, and earthworks artists found resonance with his theories. For Mel Bochner, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, and Alice Aycock, to name a few, the underlying attributes of space and time, in Kubler's sense, became a constituent element in their work.

Kubler's definition and, hence, articulation of a prime object is closely aligned with the concept of the prime number. In mathematics, a prime number has the unique quality of an integrated whole in that it remains an integer immune to divisible disruption by another number. For example, whereas the number 7 cannot be divided by 2 or 3 or 4, etc. without creating a fraction, the number 6 can be evenly divided by both 2 and 3.<sup>4</sup> Kubler notes, "Prime numbers have no divisors other than themselves and unity; prime objects likewise resist decomposition in being original entities." He also observes that "prime objects resemble the prime numbers of mathematics because no conclusive rule is known to govern the appearance of either. . . . Their character as primes is not explained by their antecedents, and their order in history is enigmatic."<sup>5</sup>

As in emergent systems, discrete changes in form are magnified through temporal variables, in which a dynamic, yet unpredictable, pattern develops. What emerges from an interaction is something extra, not conceivable as a planned attribute. Although the concept of emergence reaches back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the quality can be defined as something that self-organizing and complex adaptive systems produce.<sup>6</sup> As an elemental concept in evolutionary biology, particle physics, and market economies, emergence is a way to explain novel ideas and actions. In a Kublerian sense we can look at prime objects as belonging to a class of objects sharing similarities with emergent systems and processes. For example,

1. See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 39–45.

2. Anthony Haden-Guest quoted in Peter Schjeldahl, "The Temptation of the Fair," *The New Yorker*, December 25, 2006, available online at [www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/25/061225scraw\\_artworld](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/25/061225scraw_artworld).

3. Kubler, 9.

4. For more on prime numbers, especially the number 1, see David G. Wells, *Prime Numbers: The Most Mysterious Figures in Math* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), 13–15 and 29.

5. Kubler, 39.

6. See Norbert Wiener, *I Am a Mathematician* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), 135–36. For more on emergence, see meeting notes of the Emergent Systems Working Group, Bryn Mawr College, available online at <http://emergent.brynmawr.edu/emergent/EmergentSystemsMeetingI>.

for artists coming to the fore in the 1960s and 1970s, questions concerning the Gestalt perception of wholes (as in the 1966 *Primary Structures* exhibition at the Jewish Museum, New York City) were reflected in both art-critical discourse and the turning of sculptural forms into objects displacing space. In addition, an interest in ecologically inspired artworks employing integrated biological compatibility and sustainability were initiated as part of an inquiry into material processes and their behaviors as ends in themselves.

As prime objects become visible to the external world and enter into its domain, a host of replications and even mutations begin to generate. Like the Xerox of a Xerox, or turkey roll masquerading as turkey, replications begin to swerve and erode from their prime progenitor, creating a debased form of the original until another prime object emerges. For example, one can find the Minimalist's concern for site-specific work employed in Soho's current window displays. From the inclusion of video and light to serial repetition, these formal qualities have been appropriated by the fashion industry. For Kubler, the history of things "is intended to reunite ideas and objects under the rubric of visual forms . . ." <sup>7</sup> He views this methodology as encompassing a broader sense of objects connected to a temporal sense. Hence, video installation and window display would share the status of being part of a common visual form and, thus, the shape of time.

Jump to present times. Arthur Danto has stated that the condition of art in the present tense can be termed "objective pluralism." In this formulation, there are "no historically mandated directions for art to go in . . ." And, he continues, "Objective pluralism as I understand it means that . . . there are no historical possibilities truer than any other. It is, if you like, a period of artistic entropy, or historical disorder." <sup>8</sup> Danto's analysis is also in keeping with Kubler's methodology of invoking nonlinear, self-organizing systems. For Kubler, however, historical frames proceed over significant intervals of time, and it is through extended temporal thresholds that change occurs. Like Danto, Kubler keeps his directive open to include starts and stops in any direction. On the other hand, concepts of historical determinism are forever with us. Most catalogue essays are written with the inclusion of sequential influences, as if by tracing history's timeline, one can construct a linear evolution. For example, can one historicize the work of Richard Serra without paying homage to the Russian Constructivists?

### **The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths**

In the same era that saw the birth of surrogate motherhood, a substitutive method of gestation, the painting surrogate was conceived by Allan McCollum. <sup>9</sup> Employed as a night janitor in an office building in downtown Manhattan, McCollum would gaze into the empty offices across streets evocative of desolate canyons. He talks about the circumstances behind his series *Surrogate Paintings* as the result of his opportunity to "look into the office spaces housed in other buildings across the way and see paintings hanging on the walls." Although he couldn't quite make out their content, he began thinking of such paintings as anonymous objects that functioned primarily to fill wall space. He went on to derive an object that "seemed to symbolize a painting: it was a frame, a mat and something black inside." <sup>10</sup>

7. Kubler, 9.

8. Arthur Danto, "Art after the End of Art," in *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 123 and 124.

9. On surrogacy, see *Surrogate Motherhood: Politics and Privacy*, ed. Larry Gostin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

10. Anne Rorimer, "Self-Referentiality and Mass-Production in the Work of Allan McCollum 1969–1989," in *Allan McCollum*, exh. cat. (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1989).

Casting this iconic recipe in hydrostone and then painting the internal surfaces of the objects with black enamel, the artist arranged the pictures as gallery installations in a nineteenth-century salon style. Grouped as sets of small, repetitive squares and rectangles, McCollum's surrogate paintings have a decidedly cool air about them, satirizing painting as a fetish-commodity. Also revealing an ironic twist concentrated in ideas of abstract painting and Minimalism, this gesture initiated considerations about specialized objects such as "art" and what they stand for in a mass-mediated culture. As surface veneer representing as closely as possible the object of desire, a surrogate is a stand-in or substitute. Is a substitute, a surrogate, or a look-alike yet another form of Kubler's replications? Can we conceive of the McCollum surrogates as a debased form of Minimalism or the beginning of a pattern that changes direction? As a cultural meme, surrogacy has leaked into cultural and social norms far removed from Minimalism's Gestalt aesthetic. Do we view surrogate motherhood as a degraded form of motherhood, or, on the other hand, has it become an opportunity for reconfiguring traditional beliefs? How shall such patterns of imitation be viewed in art, culture, and the social world?

In 1936 Walker Evans photographed the Burroughs family, sharecroppers in Depression-era Alabama. Signature pieces of the artist, the photographs portray a family poverty-stricken, yet poised and proud. The pictures record in documentary form a time in American history before television and mega-shopping malls. In the empathetic framing and intense black, white, and gray tones of one photograph, a father, a mother, and several children gaze directly into the camera's recording lens. In 1979 Sherrie Levine rephotographed several Evans photographs from an exhibition catalogue (*First and Last*) and exhibited them under the collective title *After Walker Evans*. Although each of Levine's images is as true a likeness as any reproduction generates, a casual view of the installation would lead the observer to assume that this was, in fact, an exhibition of Evans works from the 1930s. To the viewer's surprise, recasting Evans within the context of appropriation, namely a conscious effort not to plagiarize, but rather to make evident the ease of "framing" as the simple title suggests, can in fact generate new layers of meaning.

Invoking the Duchampian maneuver of recontextualization, Levine's "ready-made" art was not based on manufactured goods, but was itself a recontextualization of another artist's work. Levine's art has been critically acclaimed by Susanne Holschbach as one that "reflects the mechanism of the art system, built around expressions such as authorship and originality . . ." Levine's work collapsed the boundaries between Evans's signature style and her own, calling into question just those qualities the critics had celebrated in it.

In 2001 Michael Mandiberg scanned the same photos, and created the websites *AfterWalkerEvans.com* and *AfterSherrieLevine.com* to disseminate the images while making an ironic comment on how we assess images in our digital age. At *AfterSherrieLevine.com*, one finds a selection of these images, linked to high-resolution, exhibition-quality digital files that can be downloaded and printed. A certificate of authenticity for each image, which one prints and signs, is attached to the site, along with directions on how to frame the image so that it will fulfill the certificate's requirements. With the image's URL built into the title, the pictures are locatable and downloadable by anyone who sees or reads about them. By distributing the images online with certificates of authenticity,

11. Susanne Holschbach, "Sherrie Levine: *After Walker Evans*," available online at <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/after-walker-evans/>.

Mandiberg makes them accessible to any piker, dolt, or Joe Schmoe. For Mandiberg, *AfterSherrieLevine.com* and *AfterWalkerEvans.com* create images with “cultural value, but little or no economic value.”<sup>12</sup> However, the “original” Levines are under copyright protection, while the Evans photos are not.<sup>13</sup>

### Art and Its Imitations—Family Resemblances

Examples of contemporary art also speak to visual repetition, if not in exactitude, then in parallels of signature style. Concerning time’s criss-crossing arrows within the continuity of visual tropes, several examples can be considered: Cubo-Futurist works by Kazimir Malevich and the “tubism” of Fernand Léger, the metal trees of Robert Rauschenberg and Roxy Paine, the abstractions of Paul Feeley and Philip Taaffe, the animal carousels of Bruce Nauman and Michael Joo, and the narrative paintings of Judith Linhares and Dana Schutz. It is this kind of visual rearticulation that resuscitates nagging questions about the concept of originality in art and market-driven aesthetics.

Influences in visual art can also be regarded as extended lines of historical narratives, emerging from personal history and private obsession. Schutz’s exuberantly bold paintings, ranging from the grotesque to a self-effacing playbook, present figures in quirky architectural spaces. Transfused with eccentric color and scripted by imagination, Schutz’s powerful paintings are at once unrecognizable yet somewhat familiar.

Linhares’s paintings, describable as reworkings of fairy-tale creatures, are both mythic and private. Art-historical subjects such as Cézanne’s *Bathers* and forays into the revival of flower paintings meet Jack and Jill or a cameo appearance from a Big Bad Witch. By twisting childlike images into an amalgam of girls gone bad, her work reverberates in pigmented saturation and gives a kick in the pants to perspectival space. Working in this self-styled manner since the 1960s, Linhares’s work has intersected with expressionistic and narrative idioms embedded in the history of painting.

In reviewing a 2006 Linhares exhibition at the Edward Thorp Gallery in New York, *Rowing in Eden*, the *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz points to a comparison between Linhares and Schutz:

The ghost of Dana Schutz’s recent work hovers over this exhibition. Similarities exist between these artists, but the differences are significant. Schutz’s color is sunburned, strange, and more original; Linhares’s is more like meringue. Schutz’s world is manic, formal, and fought for; the structure of her work is almost sculptural; Linhares’s is mythic, airy, and executed in an easygoing but adept manner. Schutz may only be 29, but I believe her work has helped free up Linhares, as well as a number of other somewhat older artists (including Cecily Brown).<sup>14</sup>

This visual parallel has caught the eye of many viewers, in whom the “family resemblance” of stylistic concerns has generated its own dialogue. At [www.Painternyc.blogspot.com](http://www.Painternyc.blogspot.com), a chat room for artists to voice their opinions about painting, the art world, rocket careers, grad school, and the like, twenty-nine pages of comments concerning the Judith Linhares–Dana Schutz correlation appear. The entries are written anonymously, and some are worth noting:

12. Michael Mandiberg, “Second Statement,” available online at [www.aftersherrielevine.com/statement2.html](http://www.aftersherrielevine.com/statement2.html).

13. See Jonathon Delacour, “Appropriation Art and Walker Evans,” February 7, 2009, post to “The Heart of Things,” <http://weblog.delacour.net/photography/appropriation-art-and-walker-evans/>. More currently, Shepard Fairey’s “appropriation” of an AP photograph as the source of his *Hope Prints* continues to raise questions concerning authorship, fair use, and intellectual property in the arts.

14. Jerry Saltz, “Dawn’s Early Light,” *The Village Voice*, March 31, 2006, available online at [www.villagevoice.com/2006-03-28/art/dawn-s-early-light/](http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-03-28/art/dawn-s-early-light/).

Anonymous said . . .

. . . funny how artists get ignored until someone else “steals” (inadvertently) [sic] their entire career. While Schutz makes interesting paintings . . . I would prefer the weird experience of Linhares anyway. . . .

. . .

the fantasy said . . .

I also think that a lot of the love comes from the hatred of Schutz.

. . .

Imageworship said . . .

. . . You mean a jealousy of Schutz. She is a great artist, I highly doubt she is ripping off Linhares. Maybe there is a touch of influence but beyond that nothing . . .

. . .

Anonymous said . . .

. . . At Dana Schutz’s second show, the Fred one, I approached her to ask if she knew a painter named Judith Linhares. She absolutely did and knew her work.<sup>15</sup>

In the media and press, the dialogue took on a life of its own. In Jennifer Riley’s *Brooklyn Rail* review of Linhares’s 2006 show, the critic provides a brief history of Linhares’s influences: “Much has been written of her West Coast upbringing and education, her kinship with Symbolist painting, Outsider art, and Surrealism, her interest in ‘Bad Girl’ behavior and her inclusion in Marcia Tucker’s landmark ‘Bad Painting’ exhibition at the New Museum in 1978.”<sup>16</sup> Two years earlier, in a 2004 *Index Magazine* interview of Dana Schutz by Peter Halley, the reader had been greeted with similar descriptive language:

Peter: Well, someone could say your paintings are ugly in the same way [as the German Expressionists].

Dana: I suppose so. People generally use three labels for my work—bad painting, outsider art, or folk art—and they all irk me. Bad painting doesn’t bother me as much, because I know people reference it as a label for certain work in the ’70s.<sup>17</sup>

Shall Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” be invoked? Are questions concerning the relative relationship of aesthetic concerns being investigated in the context of long- or short-term historical inheritance, taking into consideration what factors affect the emergence of how we come to value contemporary art objects? Bringing art to public view operates as a form of cultural consensus arising from the social, political, and economic interests of the supporting agencies. Are there any underlying systemic rules by which we can assess art objects in the current epoch? Beside surface appearance, what else is at play here?

15. See entry dated March 18, 2006, at [www.painternyc.blogspot.com/2006/03/judith-linhares.html](http://www.painternyc.blogspot.com/2006/03/judith-linhares.html).

16. Jennifer Riley, “Judith Linhares,” *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2006, available online at [www.brooklynrail.org/2006/04/artseen/judith-linhares](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/04/artseen/judith-linhares).

17. Dana Schutz interview with Peter Halley, *Index* 42 (February 2004), available online at [www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/dana\\_schutz.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/dana_schutz.shtml).

## Double Play

In an essay entitled “Art after the End of Art” published in *Artforum* in 1993, Danto raises the question about the surfacing of styles and attitudes a second time around. He quotes a passage by Karl Marx: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has

forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." Danto goes on to say that

I would clearly rather see in the repetition a ratification of historical necessity than a farcical reenactment—not the only reason I prefer being a follower of Hegel than of Marx. But in truth I am a follower of neither, for I don't especially believe in historical repetitions. If anything, I suppose, I am a follower of Wittgenstein, who held that the meaning of a sentence is often a function of the role it plays in what he termed a "language game," so that the same sentence has different meanings if repeated on different occasions. Or, better, I am a follower of Paul Grice and his thesis of "conversational implicature," which says, simply put, that to understand what someone means by an utterance one must fill in the conversation in which it is uttered and see what movement of thought the sentence advanced.<sup>18</sup>

We can extrapolate that in various ways we judge an artist's body of work in this manner. To see a single artwork or period alone doesn't tell us very much about an artist's propositional stance on image-making, since there is no anchoring of movement in time, backward or forward, nor a sufficient period of duration. Many times artists traverse one another's territory, knowingly or not. How can signature style be interpreted in an age of historical entropy? Does it not carry with it a broader range of possibilities? If Kubler's frame of reference is an invocation of the prime object, how can this concept be employed out of the entropic remains of our current time? Will the emergence of other models of visual knowledge be factored into historical time, global space, and transdisciplinary consciousness?

Consumption of objects has become a way to embrace cultural value. But the question remains as to the function of art as a critical fiction, a cultural entity manifesting symbolic values in historical time. For Kubler, cultural artifacts and their copies can occupy the same historical epoch. Distinctions can nevertheless be made between a prime object and its replications. But the copy has become a discourse in itself, a filter or filler for accepting the status quo.<sup>19</sup> In an age of historical entropy, how does the copy interface with subjectivity, authenticity, and epistemic value? What epistemological underpinnings and models of art practice are penetrating current discourse? To what extent do originality and authorship matter? Or, on the other hand, have we all been appropriated by media spin?

Suzanne Anker is a visual artist and theorist working at the intersection of art and the biological sciences. Her 2009 exhibitions include *The Hothouse Archives*, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin; *The Glass Veil*, Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité, Berlin; *Corpus Extremus*, Exit Art, New York; and *Inside (Art and Science)*, at the Cordoaria, Lisbon, Portugal. Her 2009 publication *Visual Culture and Bioscience* is distributed by D.A.P. She is chair of the fine arts department at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

18. Arthur Danto, "Art after the End of Art," *Artforum*, April 1993.

19. See Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodern Repetition," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: Godine, 1984), 27. For a fuller discussion of appropriation, see Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).