11
Postmodernist Approaches to Making Art

Are we having fun yet?


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Art elements and design principles explored in previous chapters derive from sources throughout Western history. The ancient Greeks sought ideal beauty in the form of idealized realism, harmony, and exacting mathematical standards of proportion and scale. In 1757 philosopher David Hume listed the qualities of beautiful artifacts, which included uniformity, variety, clarity of expression, realistic exactness, and brilliance of color; and in 1899 Arthur Wesley Dow proposed principles for "harmonious works of art" (subordination and rhythmic repetition, symmetry, opposition, transition, and Japanese notions of black and white mentioned in Chapter 8). Although these articulations of art elements and explanations of design principles were born and matured in times different from ours, we can still apply them to artifacts made in the past, in cultures across the world, and to objects, spaces, and events created very recently for daily living and for viewing in galleries.

Using elements and principles, we have examined artifacts, especially of our time. Current writers classify most of the works we have analyzed as examples of "modern art" or "postmodern art." We have mixed them without distinguishing between modern and postmodern, but this chapter concentrates on postmodern approaches to art making. We are already intuitively aware of postmodernist thinking because we have grown up with it, and it is part of our consciousness. Postmodernist thinking dominates the popular culture we experience in our daily lives and is also a dominant force behind much of the art we see in art-world venues.

Modernism and Postmodernism in Culture

Modern art and postmodern art grow out of and contribute to cultural modernity and postmodernity. Modernist and postmodernist thinking are broader and more expansive in time than their applications in modern art and postmodern art.

Postmodernism refers to both a period of time and a web of ideas, both of which resist specificity. Many scholars place the beginning of postmodernism in Paris 1968, when college students and some of their influential professors, joined by workers, revolted against what they saw as an oppressive French institutional system and, by extension, all established social and political structures. Art historians place the beginnings of postmodern art earlier than 1968, crediting especially the artist Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and the art movements of Dada (peaking around 1920) and Pop Art (beginning in the mid-1950s).

Postmodernist theory owes much to French theorists Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, who each in his own way radically reappraised modern assumptions about large ideas about history, culture, identity, representation, and language. Postmodernist thinking continues to influence all of the humanities, especially the study of literature in college departments of English literature. Postmodernist theory has both its proponents and its skeptics, but most instructors would agree that it cannot be ignored if we are to understand recent developments in the arts and humanities.

As a general set of beliefs, postmodernism is easiest to understand as ideas in relation to the ideas of modernism. Modernism began with the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason, c. 1687–1789), a European intellectual movement emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition. It was the basis of major social upheavals culminating with the French Revolution. Ideals of modernism continue into the present, where they exist alongside postmodernist ideas. Theoretical postmodernism is both a development of and a reaction against theoretical modernism. Some theorists and practitioners think of postmodernism as "antimodernism."

Modernism itself began as a radical reaction against an earlier set of values and beliefs. Modernists champion reason, science, and democracy to erase ignorance, superstition, and unquestioning support of church and state rulers. Modernists rally around the flags of freedom and individuality and the companion ideas of free enterprise, the Industrial Revolution, and capitalism.

Postmodernists argue that modernist beliefs have not led to a society free from poverty, political tyranny, and ignorance. They are less optimistic than modernists about the possibility of progress and the betterment of society. They are skeptical about the freedom of the individual, arguing that our actions are constrained by social context. They doubt that the power of reason alone can solve social problems. Postmodernist social critics assert that modernists did not deliver on their promises of a just society for all. They argue further that modernism oppressed workers under capitalist industrialization, excluded women and minorities from the public sphere, and colonized lands and peoples for economic and religious reasons.

Barbara Kruger's Untitled (Are we having fun yet?) (11.1) can be read as a rhetorical question that implies negative answers about how women and minorities have been and are being treated by dominant social groups. Kruger’s use of a female subject can be generalized to anyone with less power in relation to those who dominate: a worker in relation to an employer, an indigenous people overtaken by a foreign power, and a society awash in sexist mass-media messages. In Kruger's sarcastic image, we are not yet having "fun," because we have not achieved social equity or embraced social justice.

Some postmodernists have lost hope, have despaired of the possibilities of achieving social justice, and have become nihilistic and paralyzed with pessimism. Many postmodernists, however, remain optimistic in the face
Postmodernist Approaches to Making Art Key Terms

ART WORLD The people and institutions that circulate art and discourse about it.

HIGH AND LOW ART A contested distinction between “fine art” and artifacts made for and used in daily living. Postmodernists collapse the distinction between “high” and “low.”

WORK OF ART A modernist term that implies a notion of an artifact as singular and unique and the product of isolated genius.

TEXT A conception of artifacts as webs of references to other artifacts; postmodernists prefer it to work of art because the latter implies singular artifacts independent of other artifacts and ideas.

THE ABJECT What is considered base about being human; things a culture thinks of as shameful and wishes to hide.

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE A unique reaction to an artifact or event that is disengaged, disinterested, and removed from practical concerns.

JOUISSANCE A French term adopted by postmodernists to express the joy of losing oneself in an artwork; a term used in contrast to aesthetic experience.

COLLABORATION Working as part of a team rather than as a sole creator.

APPROPRIATION Possessing, borrowing, copying, quoting, or excerpting images that already exist, are made by other artists, or are available in the public domain.

SIMULATION Imitating, copying, or reproducing an experience of the real.

SIMULACRUM, SIMULACRA Representations of things that no longer have an original or never had one; insubstantial semblances of real things or events.

HYBRIDIZATION Mixing diverse cultural influences in an artwork to make a new, distinct statement.

MIXED MEDIA Different media used in a single work of art.

LAYERING Placing images on top of images in artworks to make new associations and meanings.

MIXED CODES Different conventional means of communication used in a single work of art, such as a combination of words and images.

RECONTEXTUALIZATION Placing what is usually seen in one venue into a different venue to create new associations and meanings.

INTERTEXTUALITY The shaping of one sign’s meaning by other signs in a single work of art.

THE GAZE Positioning the maker and the viewer of an image as the active subject, and what is represented as the passive object.

DISSONANCE Lack of harmony or agreement between elements in a work.

IDENTITY POLITICS Political action through artifacts to advance members of groups who are underrepresented, misrepresented, or oppressed because of race, religion, gender, and other social conditions.

METAPHOR A direct comparison between two or more seemingly unrelated subjects; showing something with the attributes of another thing.

IRONY The use of words and images to convey the opposite of what they say and show.

PARODY A mockery of an artifact, an event, or type of representation.

Modern Art and Postmodern Art

Modern art, which was highly influenced by seventeenth-century Enlightenment views of the world, developed in the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century and continues to be influential today. Major movements of modern art include

Impressionism
Postimpressionism
Symbolism
Fauvism
Cubism
Expressionism
Dada
Bauhaus
Surrealism
Abstract Expressionism
Color field painting
Pop Art
Op Art
Hard-edge painting
Russian Formalism
Minimalism
Photorealism
Art photography
Socially motivated journalist photography

We have already seen some land art (see 3.6), performance art (see 6.13), and installations (see 7.22).

Modern artists are far too many to enumerate here. They fill our art history books and deserve careful study, and we have already seen many examples, such as Jacques-Louis David (see 6.14), Georges Seurat (see 5.22), Pierre Bonnard (see 4.53), Henri Matisse (see 3.20), Pablo Picasso (see 5.45), Kasimir Malevich (see 10.2), Wassily Kandinsky (see 3.43), Marcel Duchamp (see 6.22), Alexander Calder (see 6.15), Mark Rothko (see 4.32), Helen Frankenthaler (see 5.48), Georgia O’Keeffe (see 5.25), Ellsworth Kelly (see 9.27), Al Held (see 5.46), Eva Hesse (see 8.7), Bruce Nauman (see 7.6), Sam Gilliam (see 9.15), Bridget Riley (see 6.19), and many others that you will pursue in your study of art history.

Critic and philosopher of art Arthur Danto summarizes the development of modern art as a series of "erasures." He described the development of modern art this way:

"...a dismantling of a concept of art which had been evolving for over half a millennium. Art did not have to be beautiful; it need make no effort to furnish the eye with an array of sensations equivalent to what the real world would furnish it with; need not have a pictorial subject; need not deploy its forms in pictorial space, and need not be the magical product of the artist's touch."

In part due to the invention of photography, modern artists dropped realistic representations in paint; they distorted subject matter through Cubism; they eliminated subject matter as essential to art and turned to nonobjective works; they stopped hand rendering the illusion of three-dimensional forms on two-dimensional surfaces and accepted the purity of paint as a flat medium; they eliminated the need for the artist's touch by employing commercial fabricators; conceptual artists eliminated the need to have an art object at all, instead substituting ideas for objects; and Pop artists abandoned the need for art objects to be different from ordinary ones by introducing into their artworks everyday objects such as Brillo boxes and Campbell soup cans.

The term "postmodernism" first came into use to name a new stylistic direction in architecture that moved away from the principle "form follows func-
tion" articulated by American architect Louis Sullivan. That formulation had resulted in what many architects and critics considered the austere sparseness of rectangular steel grids and glass walls and a rejection of architectural ornament. In the 1960s, American postmodernist architect Robert Venturi opened architecture to the influences of multiple historical traditions, ordinary commercial buildings, and the influence of Pop Art. In his writings and in his buildings, he resisted what had become boring in modern architecture and introduced playfulness into modernist austerity. The sequence of elevations in his Eclectic House Series (11.2) "captures the firm's inclusive yet radical embrace of history."

Postmodern artists also rejected notions of "progress" by moving from realistic representation to abstraction, turning to a pluralism of styles, and introducing great freedom and variety of expression. Like the Dadaists before them, they introduce humor and irreverence into art. Like the Pop artists who preceded them, they embrace rather than eschew the popular in culture. They reintroduced social, political, and ethical concerns into their artifacts.
Postmodern Attitudes toward Art

Postmodernism can be identified by a general set of attitudes toward art as well as characteristic approaches to making art. In this part of the chapter, we look at changes in attitudes about where art is placed, what constitutes “high” and “low” art, what is the purpose of art, and other aspects that distinguish postmodern art from traditional and modern art. After that, we will see examples of approaches that reflect these attitudes. If you have not already, you will begin to recognize postmodernist influences in visual books, advertising, product design, painting, sculpture, and all modes of art and design.

CHALLENGING THE ART WORLD

The people and institutions that circulate art and discourse about it constitute the art world. People in the art world include artists, museum directors, gallery owners and dealers, exhibition designers, publicists, connoisseurs, estimators, restorers, security guards, museum and independent curators, art critics, art collectors, art historians, art conservators and restorers, editors, writers, and advertisers. Art-world institutions include museums, commercial galleries, auction houses, private and public funding agencies, the art press, and centers for research and conservation. The art world is vast and global, with especially prominent centers in North America and Europe and also in Asia, South America, and Africa. Within North America, for example, there are important and influential centers, especially in New York City, but also in Los Angeles and Chicago and smaller cities throughout the continent. Most art that we see is brought to us by the art world.

Chuck Close (see 3.4, 4.50) views the art world as family: “Art is the other family. It’s all family and friends. I consider the artworld family to be almost as important as my real family. It gives me a sense of belonging to something larger than myself.” Although he embraces the art world, and is highly successful economically and historically because of it, he is also critical of its ways:

I hate the way, in terms of money and power and the government and stuff, I hate the way art is sold. I think it’s really bad. They have to say that the reason art is important is that it attracts and brings more money into a community than sporting events; more people attend museums than go to sporting events, and it’s good for the economy. Therefore, it’s important to support art, and art should be in the community. The trouble with that... is that what’s being missed in all this is that art is just good for the economy and good for business, but that it’s humanizing.5

Thus, although Close clearly benefits from the art market, he cautions us about its emphasis on money rather than on the betterment of humanity.

Another critique of the art world is that it discriminates against women and minorities. Emma Amos, an African American artist, says, “I am invisible as an African American woman artist. I show in February. Thank God for February. I show with other black artists in ghetto month shows that fulfill the funding needs of white institutions. Our few and far between shows seldom get shuffled into the other 11 months of the calendar.”6

The Guerrilla Girls is a group of women, mostly artists, art historians, and arts administrators, who work collectively and anonymously for social justice in the art world. They appear at art events, unannounced and uninvited, wearing miniskirts, high heels, and great hairy gorilla heads. They frequently brandish phallic bananas. They produce politically charged messages on stickers, posters (11.3), magazine advertisements,
holiday cards, and videotapes. The women continue to work collectively as a political force, and through the collectivity of their work, they attempt to foster solidarity among themselves and with other groups sympathetic to like causes.

ESCAPING THE CONFINES OF MUSEUMS AND OTHER TRADITIONAL VENUES

Some artists resist the confines of art museums and intentionally make art that cannot be housed within a museum’s walls. Robert Smithson (see 3.6), an artist of earthworks too large to be housed in museums, was particularly critical of traditional art institutions:

Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called galleries. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society.7

Smithson made art directly in the landscape, in part to circumvent the commercial galleries. He also wrote passionately about the need to create works of art outside of the gallery and museum systems. He felt that the galleries and museums sanitized art to the point that it became nothing more than a portable object ready for consumption.

Barbara Kruger (see 11.1) and Jenny Holzer (see 7.1) often attempt to reach audiences beyond those that visit art galleries and museums by placing their works in public venues. Kruger has placed her pieces internationally, in different languages, on billboards, the outside of buses, and T-shirts, matchbooks, and handbags. Holzer first displayed her now famous series of one-line sayings, Truisms, on sheets of copy paper that she pasted to walls in the SoHo district of New York City. She had also rented signage space in Times Square in New York; Candlestick Park in San Francisco during a basketball game; the marquee of Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas, where she displayed the Truism “Money creates taste”; and Piccadilly Circus in London, where she displayed “Protect me from what I want.”

Bulgarian-born installation artist Christo and his Moroccan-born wife Jeanne-Claude are responsible for The Gates (11.4) in Central Park, New York City. They began working on the project in 1979 and finished in 2005. The installation consisted of 7,503 gates of saf-


from-colored fabric, 16 feet tall, at intervals of 12 feet, over 23 miles of park walkways. After sixteen days of display, workers removed the gates and recycled the materials. Nine hundred workers participated in the preparation, display, and removal of the project. They received financial compensation and breakfast and a hot meal during the day. As Christo and Jeanne-Claude have done for their previous projects, they maintained their independence by financing the entire $21 million project themselves through the sale of preparatory studies, drawings, collages, and scale models. They donated merchandising rights for The Gates to a charitable foundation for the park. They accepted no sponsorship or money from the city. Their art necessarily depends on large sums of money because of the massive undertaking that most of their projects entail. Their seeking of alternative ways to fund their projects is an integral, acknowledged, and publicly visible part of their art making. Smithson (see 3.6), Holzer (see 7.4), and Christo and Jeanne-Claude invite you to consider showing your work in spaces other than museums and commercial galleries and seeking alternative means of funding your work. By placing their work beyond the confines of museums, they reach larger audiences.

COLLAPSING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN “HIGH” AND “LOW” ART

Postmodern artists seek to collapse boundaries that are important to modernists, who generally elevate art to a special, independent, autonomous sphere of its own. For modernists, true art transcends ordinary life. They believe true art is “high art,” above “low culture” as
Jeff Koons is known for making "kitschy art," a contradiction in terms, for modernists. Koons is especially known for his large sculpture *Puppy* (11.5), made of live flowers, which he has installed at various worldwide locations, including its first incarnation in front of an eighteenth-century castle outside of Bad Arles, (shown here), at Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, and near the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Koons's *Banality* series consists of greatly enlarged reproductions of small popular objects, such as statues of saints, cartoon animals, Hummel figurines, busty women, naked children, and a souvenir doll of pop singer Michael Jackson. These figures are meticulously crafted in porcelain and wood, painted and sometimes gilded in gold, by artisans whom Koons supervises in Italy and Germany.

Koons has also made explicitly sexual images of himself and his wife that according to some are pornographic and demean women by merely emphasizing their physicality. Also, the artifacts that Koons, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Judy Chicago (see 8.12 and 8.13) have fabricated for themselves in their names are criticized by some because the artisans who actually fabricate the works are not given sufficient credit for their highly skilled work.

Takashi Murakami, a contemporary Japanese artist, also embraces and celebrates popular imagery. He splits his time between Tokyo and Brooklyn, combines Japanese *anime* and *manga* images, high fashion, and *Nihon-ga* (Japanese-style) paintings of the nineteenth century and has influenced Andy Warhol's Factory and Walt Disney animation. His work references religion, subcultures, and art history. In the fall of 2003, Murakami transformed New York City's Rockefeller Plaza into a fantastical pop cityscape with *Reversed Double Helix* (11.6), a major display of sculpture that included a freestanding 30-foot-tall Buddha-like figure, "Mr. Pointy," with multiple arms and a pointed head, two giant floating "eyeball" balloons, and a forest of wide-eyed mushrooms for public seating. The "eyeball" balloons, each 30 feet in diameter, floating 60 feet in the air, surveyed the scene around Rockefeller Center. Murakami typically employs producers of hobbyist models rather than fine-art craftspeople to execute his works. An important "low-art" aspect of Murakami's work is its commercial nature: many of his pieces sell as mass-produced consumer items. In 2000, Murakami curated *Superflat*, an exhibition of Japanese

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art, which acknowledged the influence of mass-produced entertainment on contemporary aesthetics.

Nan Goldin embraces an everyday style of photography. She merges a family snapshot aesthetic with “high-art” photography. Goldin photographically documents the lives of family members, friends, and acquaintances, initially in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and then in locations around the world (11.8). Goldin’s work has been described this way: “Nan Goldin’s color portraits of her bohemian community in the 1970s turned the intimate family snapshot into an artistic genre and valid photographic art.” Her work is similar in motivation and spirit to family snapshots and home videos, preserving memories of family, friends, and significant occasions. Her subject matter, however, is intimate views of the private lives of her chosen “family,” outsiders to the mainstream, such as lesbians, gays, and transgendered people. Her work is candid, direct, and close-up: she is part of rather than distanced from those she photographs. She likens her work to a diary. Goldin’s use of the vernacular snapshot aesthetic is an intentional strategy: she is not simply elevating snapshot photos to the realm of high art. Hers is a socially aware and insightful use of the everyday camera to view subjects who have often been ignored in establishment art. Koons (see 11.5), Murakami (see 11.6), and Golden have opened possibilities for you to use the ordinary and everyday as sources of your own art making.
TEXTS” AND “WORKS”

Modernists talk about a work of art, and postmodernists prefer the term text, borrowing a word from literary theory. In modernist thinking, artworks are often considered unique creations made by gifted individuals. In postmodernist thinking, however, artworks and all artifacts are more collaborative in nature and highly influenced by culture—that is, other works—which is why postmodernists chose a different word to refer to them.

Works are singular, speaking in one voice, that of the artist, which leads the viewer to look for the artist’s singular meaning; texts imply that any artwork is a network of references and citations of other works from many disciplines. Postmodernists believe an artwork is a confluence of many voices that speak, blend, and clash, that images are influenced more by culture than we had previously thought.

Elliott Earls’ image Abraham-n-Isaac (11.7) is an artwork, but it is more fully understood as a partial text rather than a singular and self-contained work. The image is part of a larger text called Bull and Wounded Horse that consists of an exhibition of photographs, objects, and large prints, and a performance piece that incorporates these objects. Making sense of the references in Abraham-n-Isaac requires knowledge of other texts upon which it draws: the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew text at the base of the image, and specifically the story of Abraham following God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac without question. The image is set in contemporary hip-hop style, with African Americans representing the two Biblical characters, one barefoot and in overalls, with a revolutionary hat and hairstyle, and the other in dress pants and two-toned leather shoes. Their tattoos are signifiers that carry cultural connotations as well as the specificity of what they show. Bling is abundant, around the neck of Isaac, and in the graphical symbols above the heads, which in turn reference the Star of David, a crucifix, the crescent of Islam, and a dollar sign. Blood spews forth. Through these multiple references to texts in sacred and popular cultures, Earls may be referencing black-on-black crime, as well as religiously
based conflict in our post-9/11 world, and greed for money. It is not a simple or self-explanatory work but highly dependent on references external to itself.

REJECTING ORIGINALITY

Postmodern artists attempt to free us from the pressure of being wholly original in our art making. In premodern times, such as the Middle Ages, artists were anonymous contributors to the community and self-expression was not an ideal, nor was the invention of new styles. However, in modern times, since the European Renaissance in fact, values shifted as the individual was honored and personal freedom was extolled. The “genius” artist was especially made to be a champion of the new, the first, the cutting edge. Postmodernists, on the other hand, are highly suspicious of the possibility of being original and do not hold originality as a value.

Many current artists encourage you to replace the pressure to be original with an awareness of the many visual texts that constitute your experience of the world, using this awareness to create your own art. As American artist Joyce Kozloff observes, “All artists lift from everything that interests them and always have—from earlier art, other work that’s around, or sources outside art.” Such awareness allows you the freedom to quote from other sources as you add your own imprints and insights.

ACCEPTING THE ABJECT

A base aspect of being human, such as a corpse, excrement, vomit, and things associated with what a culture thinks of as shameful and wishes to hide, is known as the abject. Artists who accept the abject and use it in their work make art that might seem ugly or repulsive. They confront us with the totality of being human and ask us to accept the body and its functions knowingly and willingly.

From afar, Mona Hatoum’s Deep Throat (11.9) looks like a pleasant table set for one. When you approach the table, however, you see a scientifically accurate videotape of the human digestive system at work on food that has been swallowed. The activity of digestion and elimination is a taboo topic while at the dinner table. Hatoum banishes the taboo and embraces by implication other functions of the body usually avoided in polite conversation. Her art asks us to see what we might prefer to ignore about life.

JOUISANCE

The postmodernist version of the modernist aesthetic experience is jouissance, a French word meaning pleasure and enjoyment and carrying with it sexual overtones. The modernist aesthetic experience is a heightened awareness of an object while one is both disinterested and distanced. It is the enjoyment of something for its own sake without wanting to possess it. Jouissance, in postmodern usage, refers to viewers being so lost in a work of art that they lose all self-awareness and objective distance from the work being viewed. The concept of jouissance acknowledges a desire for possession inflamed by art. The two approaches to artworks are different, and the difference hinges mainly on personal engagement (jouissance) with a work of art versus a distanced and objective aesthetic appreciation of a work.

Vlado Mulunč’ and Frank Gehry’s Dancing Building (11.10), completed in 1996 in Prague, has a sense of jouissance about it. The architecture plays with and against modernist steel box and glass skyscrapers and their formal austerity and rectangular rigidity. Dancing Building collapses rigid modernist angles with sensuous curves. It destabilizes expectations of normality and makes us want to experience the inside of the building. In a metaphorical sense, modernist architecture is male and phallic, and postmodernist architecture embraces feminine aspects.

Postmodern Strategies for Making Art

All of the postmodern strategies for making art embrace to greater and lesser degrees the postmodern attitudes just discussed. These strategies include working collaboratively, appropriating, simulating, hybridizing,
mixing media, layering, mixing codes, recontextualizing, intertextualizing, confronting the gaze, using dissonance, constructing identities, using narratives, creating metaphors, and using irony and parody. Further, these approaches to making art overlap; although one may stand out in a particular work, none is used alone.

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

In premodern times, artists often worked as part of a team; every artist had a specialty, and collaboration was an efficient way to produce works that needed many skills. In modern times, great value has been put on individual creations. Now, in the postmodern era, some artists are returning to collaborative working methods instead of being a sole creator. If you work in a design field, you are likely to be part of a team of artists and other creators. In the fine arts, you might find that some projects—large-scale sculptures, for example, or glassblowing—require collaboration, and others lend themselves to it.

In sixteenth-century India, a group of artists employed by the Mughal emperor Akbar produced exquisite miniature paintings using hand-ground pigments on handmade paper. *Khamsa*, the miniature book containing the paintings, illustrates age-old tales of love, war, religion, and political power. In 2003, six young Pakistani artists trained in the tradition of miniature techniques made *Untitled* (11.11), one of twelve exquisite miniature images that make up the Karkhana project (2003). The young artists are inspired by the Mughal court atelier, or Karkhana, where a group of artists would work together on a single painting. Following the Mughal tradition, the contemporary Pakistani artists also used handmade paints and papers, but included collaged photographic images, stencils, and rubber stamps. Rather than working in one studio, they worked across the globe, sending their jointly made paintings back and forth to one another between Melbourne, Chicago, Lahore, and New York City. One artist begins an image on a sheet of paper and mails it
to someone else, who continues working on it before sending it to someone else. The contemporary group of six artists has a spiritual purpose in their collective art making. They are responding peacefully and creatively to cultural conflicts by working collaboratively and across cultures in contrast to the rise of political and religious violence worldwide following September 11, 2001.  

APPROPRIATING WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

The most direct and clearest challenge to modernist notions of originality and works made by individual artists is appropriation. To appropriate is to possess, borrow, steal, copy, quote, or excerpt images that already exist, made by other artists or available in the public domain and general culture. Appropriation art of the 1980s and after is especially informed by French artist Marcel Duchamp's “ready-mades,” most famously _Fountain_ (11.12), an ordinary urinal that he signed and exhibited as a work of art in 1917. Duchamp's gesture was conceptual: he was challenging the prevailing definition of art as pleasing aesthetic objects.
Contemporary American artists Jeff Koons (see 11.5) and Barbara Kruger (see 11.1), discussed earlier in this chapter, are both involved in appropriation as art. Koons uses cultural icons such as Hummel figurines, pop star Michael Jackson, artifacts of the NBA, and mundane household items. He insists he is sincere in his work and that he is not critical toward what he displays. He rejects hidden meanings, believing that there is no gap between your perception of the work of art at first glance and any deeper meaning in the artifact itself. Kruger's work is informed by feminist theory and is overtly and obviously critical of social injustices. She appropriates photographs from popular culture, crops them, heightens their contrast, and adds text. The texts she uses are also appropriated from popular culture, but she subverts the texts with ironic twists of phrasing and word choice, juxtaposing words and pictures. Like Duchamp, both Koons and Kruger take material from popular culture and use it for conceptual ends: Koons wants to celebrate that culture, and Kruger wants to make fundamental changes in it.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York owns a work of appropriated art by American postmodernist Richard Prince, Untitled (11.13). He made it from one of the images of a successful TV and print advertising campaign for Marlboro cigarettes. Prince selected a portion of the image and enlarged it, thus diminishing its original sleekness and exaggerating its mechanical means of production. The Metropolitan refers to Prince's piece as "a copy [the photograph] of a copy [the advertisement] of a myth [the cowboy]." The museum interprets Untitled as "a meditation on an entire culture's continuing attraction to spectacle over lived experience." Through his "rephotographing" of images, Prince intends to reveal that mass-media images are "hallucinatory fictions of society's desires," undermining their seeming naturalness.

Art critic Hal Foster tells us appropriation art reveals that "underneath each picture there is always another picture." Foster argues that the importance of appropriation is that it entails a shift in position: "The artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacle." Foster's remark relates to seeing any artifact as a text rather than as a solitary and original work, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

SIMULATING THE "REAL"

The process of imitating or copying is simulation. The related concept of simulacra, developed especially by Jean Baudrillard, a French theorist of postmodernism, is a prominent theme explored by postmodernists. Simulacra (singular simulacrum) are representations of things that no longer have an original or never had one to begin with, insubstantial semblances of real things or events. The idea of the simulacrum asserts that we are no longer able to distinguish between the real and the simulated "hyperreal" of television, advertising, video games, role-playing games, and all kinds of spectacles in contemporary society. In Baudrillard's thinking, the distinction between the real and the representation collapses, and all we know are the signs of popular culture and media. Any image moves from being a reflection of reality, to a perversion of reality, to a mask of the absence of reality, to pure simulacrum—having no relation to reality at all.14

Betty Boop (11.14), a popular sexual icon, can serve as an example of a simulacrum. The animated cartoon character appeared in a series of films produced by Paramount Pictures in the 1930s and has remained popular ever since. She is based on a real singer, Helen Kane, who herself rose to fame by imitating Annette Hanshaw, a jazz singer in the 1920s. Betty Boop, a copy, survives both Kane and Hanshaw, actual people—she is a copy that no longer refers to an original but that has taken on an independent life of her own.

Photography, a medium based on copying, with the property of realistic-looking duplication, lends itself especially well to playing with simulation by contemporary artists. Gregory Crewdson, for example, is a photographer who uses the conventions, techniques, and technicians of cinema to produce convincing-looking simulacra in the form of still photographs. Untitled, Winter (11.15) is a photograph that Crewdson made with the help of a set designer, cinematographer, and professional actors. The image is a composite of two different shots: he used one central scan for the bedroom and the man, and another scan for the woman. The postproduction work with Photoshop software to refine the image was elaborate but adds to the realistic look. A professional crew may be beyond your art budget, but Crewdson's idea of using realistic images to subvert viewer trust in the truth of images is open to you.

HYBRIDIZING CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The process of mixing diverse cultural influences in an artwork is hybridization. In postmodern terminology, it refers to "the processes and products of cultural mixing which articulates two or more disparate elements to engender a new and distinct entity." Artists and theorists who want to disrupt simplistic divisions of complex cultural generalities—such as Western/non-Western, black/white, male/female, gay/straight—share this meaning.

Sangeeta Sandrasegar is an Australian-born artist of Indian-Malaysian descent who explores in her artwork the intersection of diverse cultures in her life, relationships, and body. She brings together vastly
divergent sources: Indian cultural myths, legends, and iconography; Japanese *manga* pornographic images; the romance of Hollywood films (from the Indian film industry); and the sex and violence of Hollywood cinema. Her usual medium is paper cutouts of couples and singles that are influenced by the traditional henna designs applied to the hands and feet of Indian brides. In this way, she reflects on traditional customs and gender roles in Indian society. As in the example from the series *Goddess of Flowers* (11.16), Sandrasegar hangs ornate paper cutouts a little bit away from the wall in dimly lit spaces and projects overhead lights onto them, illuminating the cutouts and projecting shadows of them on the wall. The artist’s overlay of paper images, space, and projected shadows reinforces the complexity of cultural conditions and how we perceive them: we have materiality (red paper), projections of it (light-red shadows), and conceptual space in between (white negative space).

Masami Teraoka is from Japan and lives in the United States. His art reflects his experiences of two distinctly different cultures. In the watercolor reproduced here, *AIDS Series / Vaccine Day Celebration* (11.17), Teraoka draws upon the tradition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints to show a couple picnicking on a beach in...
A corollary modernist principle is that each artform does a certain thing best: for example, photographs should not be made to look like paintings; paintings ought to exploit their flatness; and architecture ought to reveal its function and thus not hide heating ducts under a false ceiling.

Modernists also tend to avoid mixing different media into conglomerates that ignore the individual and "pure" identities of each. Each medium ought to be explored to determine what can be done with it and its unique qualities.

Postmodernists reject these restrictive principles and attitudes and freely employ mixed media, different media in a single work of art. Robert Rauschenberg began defying the restrictions with his "combines," art objects for which he intentionally mixed painting and sculpture. In First Landing Jump (11.18), Rauschenberg mixed various media (cloth, metal, leather, electric fixture, cable, and oil paint on composition board) and ordinary objects (an actual automobile tire and wooden plank) with an art object (painting on canvas), and he makes the "painting" project off the wall like a "sculpture." Today the mixing of media in one work of art is common, but it was not always so.

**LAYERING IMAGES**

Because of photomechanical reproduction, images are cheap and plentiful. In a process called layering, some artists pile images on top of each other, changing the meanings of each of the images from what they originally meant or were intended for. To make See (11.19), for example, Rachel Hecker layered images of Tubby from the 1950s comic book Lulu and a digital sign with the word "see" over an airbrushed female nude. The woman's torso is from a 1950s painting manual, and it is suggestive of soft-core pornography. Tubby reacts to it, from a "two-dimensional, dwarfed, and infantilized" male point of view on his phallic surfboard. The word "see" in digital style is prominent. Each single image is clear enough: a cartoon character, a nude, and the word "see." By layering these simple images, the artist has complicated each and made a new painting whose meanings are ambiguous, posing questions such as these: See Tubby engage with a woman? See the male gaze at the female body? See the woman's breasts and lips fragmented from her body as if only some of her parts are valuable?

**China, China (11.20)** employs layering to communicate an idea about personal identity. It is one of more than thirty porcelain busts made by Ah Xian, a Chinese artist who fled to Sydney, Australia, in 1990 for political reasons. The busts are of anonymous men and women, young and old, heavy and slight. Bust 14, pictured here, is life-size, molded directly from the woman who modeled for Xian. On the eyes of the figure the
artist has layered a bright orange butterfly; he covers her lips with flowers. He has layered similar subject matter on her head and shoulders. The sources of the images are traditional Chinese patterns found on plates and bowls and vases in the Ming (1364–1643) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Through these busts and the images he places on them, Xian visually expresses the thought that Chinese culture is part of a Chinese person, no matter where he or she dwells.¹⁸

MIXING CODES

A “code,” in postmodern discourse, is a system of signs and a set of conventions for how the signs are to be used. Signs within a culture are arbitrary, not natural. We communally agree, for example, that at a traffic intersection, green means go and red means stop. A problem with codes is that we use them so effortlessly that they seem natural rather than invented. All images rely on codes, but usually we are so aware of the codes that we do not even think about them. A driver’s license from a state in the United States is coded: it contains words; the state symbol; a series of short black lines that we know as a bar code, but the content of which we cannot readily decipher; other numbers; abbreviations; and a colored picture of a head without a body that we read as an identification photograph. Some artists make us consciously aware of codes in everyday life and how they shape our perceptions by mixing them together and juxtaposing them.

Michael Ray Charles, an African American artist, uses mixed codes to unmask racist biases. In Cut and Paste (11.21), he appropriates a coded system from paper doll kits but uses a racist image of a black man as the doll, with various stereotypical props. The props visually signify racist attitudes with signs that are used to denigrate African Americans: a football, a hair pick, a gun, a banana, a tie, a handbag, a chicken, and a knife. Within our culture, most of us know how to read these signs, or “signifiers”; the football can be associated with racist notions of blacks’ supposed superior athleticism and inferior mental capability; the gun with the imagined threat of violence posed by black males; the handbag with purse snatching by black males; and so on. The figure itself is coded with oversized lips, braided hair, and white minstrel gloves and shorts similar to the ones Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse wears (Mickey Mouse himself is a derivation of a black minstrel figure). By mixing the code of paper doll workbooks made for children into the image, Charles suggests that racism is learned at home and at an early age.

RECONTEXTUALIZING

THE FAMILIAR

Related to the mixing of codes, another postmodernist strategy is recontextualization, “positioning a familiar image in relationship to pictures, symbols, or texts with which it is not usually associated in order to generate meaning in an artwork.”¹⁹ Fred Wilson is a contemporary master of recontextualization. He forages through museum collections and rearranges objects to give them power through unusual juxtapositions. In a detail from his exhibition Mining the Museum (11.22), he has placed a wooden post used for whipping slaves
alongside wooden furniture of the same period from the collection of the Maryland Historical Society. Similarly, Wilson's juxtaposition of steel shackles and silver tea sets in other works displays the brutality that coexisted with gentility in slave owners' lives.

Yolanda Lopez appropriated the widely displayed sacred image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and recontextualized it into a political artwork, Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe (11.23). The artist says that her series of Virgin images is her way of "questioning a very common and potent icon of the ideal woman in Chicano culture":

At a time in our history when we were looking to our past historically and culturally I wanted the Guadalupe to prompt a reconsideration of what kinds of new role models Chicanas need, and also to caution against adopting carte blanche anything simply because it is Mexican. By doing portraits of ordinary women—my mother, grandmother, and myself—I wanted to draw attention and pay homage to working-class women, old women, middle-aged over-weight women, young, exuberant, self-assertive women. Church groups that were offended by the work were absolutely correct. The works are also an attack on the authoritarian, patriarchal Catholic church.

By changing the context of a known image, you can radically alter the image's original meanings and uses.

INTERTEXTUALIZING SIGNS

The term intertextuality refers to the shaping of one sign's meaning by other signs. Each sign constitutes a text to be read. Many postmodernist strategies of art making rely on intertextuality, especially hybridizing, layering, mixing media, mixing codes, and recontextualizing. For example, Masami Teraoka's AIDS Series / Vaccine Day Celebration (see 11.17), which illustrates hybridizing, uses the sign of cherry blossoms drawn from traditional Japanese pictures, pictures of faxes that refer to AIDS, and representations of condoms. Each of these signs has many conventional associations, and when they are mixed into a single work, they then shape the meaning and significance of the other signs in the work. In Japanese visual culture, cherry blossoms signify positive aspects of spring and romance, but in Teraoka's watercolor, such a reading is confronted by the dangers of unsafe sex in an age of AIDS.

To construct meanings about works with multiple references, we need to know to what those references refer. We need to be aware of a variety of texts and how they interact in an artwork or design. The ad agency knows the references of its ad for condoms (11.24), and it also knows its target group, namely, young people who are or will be engaged in sexual activity. The ad plays with references to animals made of balloons, namely, rabbits, which are known for prolific procreation. The ad is inclusive of multiple gender roles, showing rabbits engaged in ways of procreating that are not biologically accurate for the animals. Its use of balloon-like condoms, with pastel colors, is a humorous appeal for safe sexual practices. Its audience will be able to read its multiple texts.
CONFRONTING THE GAZE

The concept of the gaze originated in film theory in the 1970s and was first identified as "the male gaze"—the tendency of Hollywood films to represent women in ways that heighten the sexual or erotic aspects of their bodies, because that was believed to be the way men looked at women. Such representations usually position the maker, and thus the viewer, as the active subject and the woman as the passive object. Film theorist Laura Mulvey argues that the female body in film too often has a "to-be-looked-at-ness." The male gaze is also pervasive in mass-media advertising, used to sell any and all kinds of products and services.

Art critic John Berger sees the gaze at work in many paintings and sculptures of the past as well. He argues that these images are the result of men’s desire to legitimately eroticize and then stare at women. Worse yet, male painters and patrons sometimes cast the blame for the pleasure on the woman. Berger writes, "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity (11.25), thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure." 21

Postmodern artists do not adopt the tradition of the gaze so much as confront it. Cindy Sherman’s large series of photographs Untitled Film Stills brings critical attention to the male gaze. In each of the works, Sherman appropriates the look and feel of unnamed Hollywood movies and dresses and poses herself as their vulnerable female characters (11.26).

Since the late 1970s, feminists have considered the possibility of "the female gaze," whereby the female is in the position of a subject who actively desires males or females. Some female artists, such as Britain’s Tracey Emin, make work based on their own sexual lives. Emin made a blue tent she called Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995 (11.27). Appliquéd to the inside walls are names of her many sexual partners. Later, she made My Bed, an installation that includes a mattress with white rumpled sheets and pillows, pantyhose, and a towel. Heaped at the bottom of the bed are vodka bottles, slippers, underwear,
cigarette packs, condoms, Polaroid self-portraits, and a fluffy white toy. Her works are both confessional and confrontational concerning her role as an active sexual subject rather than a passive sexual object. The work of Sherman, Emin, and others challenges you to a greater awareness of the implications of how you represent women in your own work.

**USING DISSONANCE**

Lack of harmony or agreement between elements in a work causes tension referred to as *dissonance.* As we saw in Chapter 5, clashing colors can create visual dissonance in a work. In what *Print* magazine calls a personal project, Cecilia Cortes Earle created an award-winning poster (11.28) employing dissonance between a plaything for a young girl—a would-be page from a cutout book—and young girls as playthings in the international sex market. The text at the bottom of the page lists statistics of young children involved in the international sex market.

Contemporary Dutch painter Robert Smit (11.29) combines dissonant images to open the possibility of new meanings. His strategy of painting is directly influenced by his reading of the important German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Influenced by the philosopher, the artist says, “What I do is join contrary, opposing, diverse images together in order to construct new meanings that reach a new level.” Smit is engaged in an ongoing ambitious project that will eventually compose one massive work on a wall that will be a grid of sixty-four squares, 7 by 7 feet each, made up of thirty-two pairs of images. Each diptych is composed of two canvases of divergent imagery, allowing the artist and the viewer to construct a new conceptual and emotional synthesis of the two canvases. Smit paints one of the two adjoining canvases. He generates the other piece photomechanically and has it digitally printed onto a similarly stretched canvas. When he puts the two square canvases of the same size next to each other to form a diptych, Smit then decides whether and how to alter each part of the pair for an effective synthesis.
Smit both digitally appropriates imagery from sources within popular culture and makes his own digital photographs. The diptychs include Photoshop manipulations, oil, acrylic, and tempera, and elements of collage. His painted and digital subject matter makes reference to significant social issues as well as personally important biographical incidents with which the viewer might identify. With a postmodernist attitude that challenges authorial voice and the unique hand of the artist, he invites the college students he teaches to add to what he has done or contribute a square of their own, which he accepts or further modifies.

CONSTRUCTING NEW IDENTITIES

The characteristics that define you or another person constitute identity. White Anglo-Saxon female is one identity. Identity can be socially determined by membership in a group according to such markers as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. When you take political action to advance the interests of members of a group thought to be oppressed and marginalized by virtue of a shared identity, you are engaging in identity politics. Artists working with identity politics make art based on issues regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and social issues rather than on aesthetic appeal. Many of the artists already discussed in this chapter—Kruger, Goldin, the Guerrilla Girls, Sandrasgar, Hecker, Xian, Charles, Wilson, Lopez, Sherman, and Emin—are to a greater or lesser extent and in different ways involved in identity politics in their artworks.

ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) and Gran Fury, two activist collectives, assert their members' gay and lesbian identities in confrontational graphic images and slogans such as “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.” The initial goals for ACT UP were “to publicize the AIDS crisis, to get drugs into bodies, and to end the AIDS crisis.” They organized (11.30) and mobilized government support of research and policies to end the AIDS epidemic nationally and worldwide, relying especially on use of confrontational graphic designs.

Melissa Shiff is a contemporary individual artist also working with important social issues in the context of her Jewish heritage. Elijah Chair (11.31) is an antique rocking chair with an embedded
video monitor that shows doors opening into various homes—rich, poor, and in between. She intends the chair to serve as "a meditation on unconditional hospitality and the unequal distribution of wealth in urban America." Shiff made Elijah Chair as part of her larger social project entitled Times Square Seder, Featuring the Matzoh Ball Soup Kitchen. The work took place in three storefront windows on Forty-second Street in New York City. The whole work, of which the chair is a central part, consisted of readings, performances, video projections, art installations, and a soup kitchen for the homeless. For the chair, Shiff drew upon Jewish customs related to the prophet Elijah: the opening of the door for Elijah and the setting aside of a chair for him. The artist created the chair to employ the prophet in the service of social action. For Shiff, the piece "documents the staggering divide of wealth in this city of extremes in an effort to show that Elijah signifies the hospitality and openness to the Other that must occur." Shiff embraces her religion and her politics in her art that confronts Jews as Others, and she shows in her artifact that the Jewish tradition embraces otherness.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a performance artist, writer, activist, and educator intensely involved with issues of his identity. He was born in Mexico City and resides in the United States. He explains the conflicts he experiences negotiating the politics of mixed identities:

"Today, I wake up as a Mexican in U.S. territory. With my Mexican psyche, my Mexican heart, and my Mexican body, I have to make intelligible art for American audiences that know very little about my culture. This is my daily dilemma. I have to force myself to cross a border, and there is very little reciprocity from the people on the other side. I physically live between two cultures and two epochs. I have a little house in Mexico City and one in New York, separated from each other by a thousand years in terms of culture. I also spend time in California. As a result, I am a Mexican part of the year, and a Chicano, the other part. I cross the border by foot, by car, and by airplane. My journey not only goes from South to North, but from the past to the future, from Spanish to English, and from one side of myself to another."

The still photograph from a live performance by Gómez-Peña (11.32) shows the anguish of being Mexican and American, concerns with his interface between Mexico and the United States, North America and South America, and border conflicts between the two countries and immigration and the political ramifications of his brown body.

ADAPTING LITERARY DEVICES TO VISUAL ART

Literary theory heavily influences postmodernist art theory. Thus it is not surprising that contemporary artists are increasingly using literary strategies when making visual artifacts.

Using Narratives. Recall from Chapter 6 that a narrative is a representation of an event or story. Storytelling, or narration, is an ancient practice of oral tradition and an old practice in the history of art, dating to the ancient Egyptians or earlier. "History painting," the depiction of an event from biblical or classical history, achieved high status during the Renaissance. Nineteenth-century painting and sculpture revealed in dramatic history stories and sometimes in sentimental family dramas. However, modern painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries turned away from storytelling in art, believing narratives were more suitable for writers than for visual artists. By the 1960s, abstraction ruled in the mainstream art world, and narrative art making was taboo. During that decade, artists rebelled against such strictures on their
creative practices and reintroduced narrative into their artworks. Charlotte Schulz makes highly detailed images based on narrative fragments:

My avenue of pursuit is in stories. I want to be affected by the larger flow of history—the history of stories. I see my own experience as a narrative that speaks about the past and present as well as the quotidian themes throughout human history. I am incorporating stories told both through words and images as a way to bring these "memories of the world" into my present realm.

Schulz says that the telling of her stories in the space of a canvas or sheet of paper is formally the most challenging aspect for her as an artist: "The almost magical transformation of bringing the three-dimensional world into the physical space of a flat surface completely engages me. Spatially, I am interested in how painting can link modern cinematic vision with the stilled and timeless vision of the Renaissance. The whole is experienced by moving from picture to picture within the painting as well as viewing it in one look."

Panel #6, with its long literary title (11.33), is one of many detailed charcoal drawings that Schulz displays as part of a grid of framed drawings on a wall. Each detailed drawing shows a dreamlike narrative that is open to multiple interpretations. When she refers to a "cinematic vision," she is referring to how each drawing can be likened to a scene of a complex movie or a fragment of an entangled and complex dream.

Narration is a common strategy in advertising on television and in print media. Producers of television commercials are adept at telling stories, sometimes based on humor, other times on sex or fear, in thirty seconds. An Altoid Mints print ad (11.34) on the back cover of a magazine suggests a narrative with one posed photograph and a tag line. "Oh, the shame" accompanies the intrusion of a mother into her son's bedroom at an implied inopportune time. The ad suggests the intense pleasure of curiously strong mints.

Creating Metaphors. As in "All the world's a stage," when we attribute the qualities of one thing (the world) to another (a stage), we are creating metaphor. As explained in Chapter 1, in a general sense, all images are metaphors because the qualities of the image are attributed to the thing being depicted. A Frida Kahlo self-portrait (see 1.28), for example, is a metaphor for an aspect of Kahlo's persona. Her selection of details shapes our interpretation of her self-image.
Many modernist artworks minimize metaphoric meaning in favor of aesthetic meaning, referring to powerful arrangements of elements in the work whose meaning tends to be self-referential or to refer to other works of art. Postmodernists, on the other hand, often refer directly to events outside of art itself and explicitly use metaphors to do so.

Korean sculptor and installation artist Do-Ho Suh’s sculpture *Public Figures* (11.35) is overtly metaphorical. It depicts hundreds of tiny human figures holding up a relatively huge pedestal of the type typically found in a public setting, such as a park. Importantly, Suh placed no figure atop the pedestal; the figures supporting the pedestal are the only figures in the sculpture. Suh’s sculpture is a metaphor for many unrecognized individuals who support societies’ heroes. He explains his work:

> I just want to recognize them. Let’s say if there’s one statue at the plaza of a hero who helped or protected our country, there are hundreds of thousands of individuals who helped him and worked with him, and there’s no recognition for them. So in my sculpture, *Public Figures*, I had around six hundred small figures, twelve inches high, six different shapes, both male and female, of different ethnicities.  

11.34 *ALTOIDS MINTS* Advertisement in *Interview* magazine, October 2006, inside back cover.
Some visual metaphors are open to a wide range of interpretations due to the lack of specificity in their references. Stephen Althouse's *Clamps* (11.36) shows two antique wooden C-clamps holding a ribbon of torn fabric. It suggests general themes such as control and restraint, hardness and delicacy. One possible interpretation is that the image is about relationships: two people hold something between them that is fragile, trying not to crush it, but not letting it slip away or unravel due to a lack of careful holding.

We have already examined how the use of formal elements, such as line, shape, and texture, contributes to the meanings of artworks. An additional way for you to communicate ideas about your subject is through the creation and use of metaphor.

**Using Irony and Parody.** You can use words and images to convey the opposite of what they say and show in a technique called **irony**. While this strategy is not new, many contemporary artists are reemploying it to engage viewers in questioning what they have received as knowledge. Knowing whether something is ironic is essential to understanding works of art, as we can clearly see in Michael Ray Charles's *Cut and Paste* (see 11.21). Some fear Charles's images will be misunderstood and taken as straightforward *reinforcements* of racist views that actually encourage what they are meant to resist. If you use irony in your own work, you have the challenge of letting the viewer know what your work is for and against without it being overly didactic and preachy.

Native American performance artist James Luna attempts to communicate his views through parody. A
parody is a mockery of a literary work, an event, or type of representation. In a street performance piece, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, Luna, a Luiseño Indian, invites passersby on the street to have their picture taken with a life-size image of Luna wearing one of three native costumes: contemporary, basic breechcloth, and a fictitious “wardance” outfit. The work explores the fascination that the general public has for “their” Indians, a fascination that often ignores the reality of American Indians today. Luna explains his art-making strategy:

One of the primary reasons I make art is to inform others about Native peoples from our point of view—a view that because of history is rich in native cultural tradition, and both influenced by and influential in contemporary American society. I truly believe that Native Tribal peoples are the least known and most incorrectly portrayed people in history, media, and the arts. I want to change those perceptions.19

For viewers to realize the meanings and impact of an ironic work of art, they need to know what the work is quoting or referring to. In the 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition, for example, New York–based artist Janine Antoni exhibited a sculpture called *Gnaw* (11.37). It is a very large, solid block of chocolate that the artist has chewed, breaking down its edges and corners, and softening its rigid form and hard planes. Its massive and simple form refers to the tradition of minimalist sculpture of the 1960s that was nonrepresentational, with no explicit references to social reality. It is also, however, a piece that “thematized contemporary female obsessions with overeating and dieting, beauty and thinness, and the masochistic longing for love that propels such obsessions.”20 So it appropriates minimalist form but adds strong social content. When making ironic works of art, if you give indications of your work’s references, you will give viewers more to understand and think about your work.