



STIL

Hg. von Julian Blunk
und Tanja Michalsky

als (geistiges) Eigentum

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Inhalt

7

Julian Blunk, Tanja Michalsky
Editorial

**Justiziabilität des Stils:
Grenzverläufe zwischen
Stil und Recht**

19

Julian Blunk
Stil als (geistiges) Eigentum.
Eine Problemskizze am
Beispiel des Historismus

35

Grischka Petri
Über den Stil aus urheber-
rechtlicher Sicht

**(Künstlerische) Praktiken
der Stilaneignung**

56

Bruno Klein
Auf schwankendem Boden:
Konzepte von *imitatio artis*
und geistigem Eigentum in
der Architektur des späten
Mittelalters

69

Marco Musillo
Ownership as Painting
Process: Painterly Alterations
and Artists' Signatures in
Eighteenth-Century Europe
and China

87

Änne Söll
Vom Stilraum zum Period
Room: Wie die USA in den
Besitz europäischer Kultur-
geschichte kamen und sich
selbst ihren eigenen Stil gaben

**Stilbesitz
als Selbstentwurf**

105

Antonia Putzger
Distinktion von Stilen und
Stil als Distinktion. Zur
retrospektiven Kategorisie-
rung der *mañera flamenca*
und deren Aneignung durch
die spanischen Habsburger

125

Jan von Brevern
Der eigene Stil. Adolf Loos
und Georg Simmel im
Wohnzimmer

141

Diego Mantoan
Style as a Common
Currency and its Aesthetic
Consequences. Appropriation
of Forms and Procedures in
Neo-Conceptual Art of the
Late Twentieth Century

**Historiografische
Stilzuweisungen**

163

Peter Seiler
La maniera di Giotto.
Evidenz und Fiktion
patrimonialer Kennerschaft
im ersten Teil der *Viten*
Vasaris

189

Joseph Imorde
Wem gehört der Barock?
Stilaneignungen / Stil-
zuweisungen / Verleben-
digungen

203

Ingo Herklotz
In Search of a Jewish Style.
Synagogue Studies and
Synagogue Building in
Nineteenth and Early
Twentieth-Century Germany

229

**Gabriella Cianciolo Cosentino,
Giovanna Targia**
Stil als (nationales)
Eigentum. Architektur-
geschichte und Denkmal-
schutz zur Zeit Alois Riegls
und Heinrich Wölfflins

**Theorie, Ethik
und Philosophie des
Stileigentums**

251

Claudia Sedlarz
Stil ohne Eigentum?
William Morris' *News from
Nowhere*

267

Karlheinz Lüdeking
Ist Stil das Ergebnis
algorithmischer Prozesse?

287

Reinold Schmücker
Stil als (geistiges) Eigentum?

Diego Mantoan

Style as a Common Currency and its Aesthetic Consequences

Appropriation of Forms and Procedures in Neo-Conceptual Art of the Late Twentieth Century

From floating balls to pickled animals

Walking through an exhibition at London's Saatchi Gallery in late 1987 a young art student stood open-mouthed in front of three basketballs floating in a vitrine, an installation by US celebrity artist, Jeff Koons.¹ The shock event inspired him to consciously reference what he had seen, in order to appropriate this particular style and import it to the UK. Within just a few years, his enthusiasm resulted in several large glass-case installations featuring dead animals, culminating in a tiger shark pickled in formaldehyde that marked a defining moment in British art history.²

The name of this aspiring artist is, of course, Damien Hirst, one of today's art superstars, and this is roughly the narrative he established in his artist biography with regard to the individual search for and possession of a signature style. Like him, a whole generation of British artists – born in the 1960s and educated in UK art schools in the 1980s – explored similar ways to individually and collectively acquire a style. Interestingly, the style they all wanted to reference was only partially defined by its aesthetics, as it was much more bound to creative procedures. Indeed, a wave of ideas-based art took off in the early 1990s, which addressed conceptualist practices established three decades earlier. It would appear that the main concern of this generation was to collectively acquire an international language to consciously translate into an individual style.

Analyzing style and its appropriation in contemporary art

The tale of Damien Hirst's epiphany makes a good starting point to investigate style in contemporary art. It highlights other similar events

that may have led a generation of artists emerging from UK art schools to deliberately appropriate an artistic language to match upcoming trends of their time. By exploring how the young British artists (YBA) drew inspiration, particularly from conceptual art practices and minimalistic aesthetics, we can address the issue of style appropriation in recent art history, as well as the role of style in autobiographical narratives of living artists. Employing international paradigms was indeed fundamental for this entire generation in order to speak a global language that quickly rose in the international art world. Therefore, the following pages will also analyze the kind of narrative established in artist biographies that accompanied the acquisition of an idea-based style.

The present paper is structured in four interconnected parts that work towards the possible understanding of the concept of style from the perspective of contemporary artists. The temporal scope of the research covers the 1980s and the following decade, though it focuses particularly on the interval between 1988 and 1992, since these years are widely regarded as the seminal period for young British artists.³ Taking the UK as an example, the geographic scope is concentrated on London and Glasgow, since the latter city rose into prominence as the only true counterpart to the English capital's art scene in the period under consideration.⁴ The research draws on a wide array of sources including exhibition catalogues and specialized magazines, reviews and interviews, as well as a rich art historical bibliography and artist papers.

As a starting point, the analysis will focus on the cultural background of the YBA generation, in order to contextualize its rise among the wider turmoil of paradigms that were shaking the art world's foundations in the late twentieth century. The tension between idea and form that characterized the second half of the last century will be thoroughly addressed in order to understand the concepts of art and the real that permeated artistic praxis in the period under scrutiny. In particular, the opinions of Hal Foster will be discussed, since the American scholar convincingly advocated an ethnographic turn in the visual arts, which also fostered a different mind-set for artistic practice as well as for the collective acquisition of a stylistic framework.

Thereafter, the research will highlight the case of several artists of this period – specifically Damien Hirst, Douglas Gordon, Simon Patterson, Sarah Lucas and Christine Borland – in order to examine autobiographical statements and behavioral models concerning the appropriation of style from the artists' perspective. Individually, these artists rank as champions of their generation, thus offering a cross-gender comparison between London and Glasgow. These cases will help to

probe how contemporary artists – especially young ones – explain and legitimize their particular choices, further employing self-narrative as a means to define a signature-style.

Finally, this chapter will explore the moral boundaries between the copying of style and the copying of work, between homage and plagiarism in today's art world. Indeed, a thin line appears to divide the concepts of appropriation and piracy, of emulation and copy. Comparing behavioral models of YBA artists as to when they reference earlier trends or specific artists, may provide an insight as regards legitimate methods and the underlying risks of style appropriation. The aesthetic outcome of this comparison may help to understand whether the concept of style still holds a particular meaning for contemporary artists or if it has become interchangeable with terms like language and trend. In this way, this case study may offer valuable conclusions on the idea of style in today's art world.

When ideas become form

The clash between idea and form, or concept and aesthetics was characteristic of a heated debate in the Western art world around the 1960s, when a new generation of critics and artists tried to overcome pure formalism à la Clement Greenberg. By means of performance art, conceptual art or even object art, the end appeared to loom over an art history bound solely to formal and stylistic elements.⁵ However, almost fifty years after dealer, Seth Siegelaub, launched conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, one can hardly deny that form matters again, because visual artists need to present some sort of practical outcome, be it a physical work or just a mental construction.⁶ It should thus be assumed that style and aesthetics operate in a different way today as compared to the past, rather than losing their role completely.

The tension between idea and form in the second half of the last century was thoroughly examined by Hal Foster, who draws fundamental conclusions about the concept of the real, which in his opinion permeated artistic praxis in the period in question. The American scholar argues that the true distinctive trait of the late twentieth century was indeed a shift from a kind of art centered on formal aspects towards a merely idea-based trend.⁷ However, this change did not favor conceptualism and abstract art alone, nor did it lead to realism and figurative art being completely forsaken. On the contrary, Foster maintains that the transition between form and idea gave rise to two opposite trends: the first one completely rejecting realism, as in the case of minimalism

and conceptual art; the other trend transcending formalism to render the traumatic experience of reality, such as in the case of pop art and hyper-realism.⁸ As regards the clash with reality, Foster further enunciates two main strategies that characterize the last decades of the past century as being illusionism and abjection. The former is represented by Jeff Koons, whose works bring reality to its extreme limits by recreating real objects, often distorted in their appearance or scale. As exemplified by abject art, the second strain would instead reject illusionism and embrace reality by abusing the human body as an iconoclastic stance. Reality could thus be reached by reconstructing its objects or by performing a deconstruction of real objects, though in both cases the artist presides over the artistic procedure with absolute authority.

The clarity of Foster's division of the art field between non-realistic trends and neo-realism – as well as between illusionism and iconoclasm as far as the realistic strain in contemporary art is concerned – appears to be consistent for the period he observes, which is roughly until the early 1990s. In the light of further developments, however, it should be debated as to whether his findings are still fit to describe the later art scene. Indeed, *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), a work by Glaswegian artist Douglas Gordon, blurred this strict division, making these distinct tendencies collide into one and the same video installation⁹. When invited to hold his first solo show in his hometown's Tramway Gallery at the age of twenty-six, Gordon decided to black out the main exhibition hall and project a slowed down version of *Psycho* (1960), Hitchcock's renowned thriller movie. The projection was arranged on a double-sided screen suspended in the center of the room in mid-air, while the running time of the film was set at twenty-four hours, hence showing one still frame after another. On the one hand, slow motion performed a deconstructivist analysis, revealing unseen details of the film. On the other hand, it changed the image flow, resulting in an iconoclastic gesture, which destroyed the movie as a narrative means.¹⁰ Furthermore, Gordon placed the projector on the floor, so that visitors could inadvertently pass in front of the beamer and see their own shadows cast on the screen, thus gaining physical access to Hitchcock's film.¹¹ First shown in April 1993 in Glasgow, *24 Hour Psycho* counts as one of the milestones of video art, which masterfully exemplifies how appropriation strategies – both of style and of work – can be complete at an aesthetic and conceptual level, without resulting in mere copies of works.¹²

Gordon's intervention appears to limit itself to an idea: slowing down a movie and transferring the cinematic experience to the gallery space. Nonetheless, the case of *24 Hour Psycho* demonstrates that when

acting inside the field of visual arts, ideas alone are hardly sufficient. Indeed, at some point artists are required to offer a final outcome of their work, either to a public or to the art market. Besides earning international recognition, Gordon's video installation was soon sought after by an influent art collector, London book distributor, Bernhard Starkmann.¹³ At first, the young Glaswegian resisted the interpretation of his piece as a ready-made, but he didn't know what to sell exactly, as he wasn't the film director nor did he own the rights to the Hollywood movie. Transforming Gordon's conceptual intervention into a commodity for the market necessarily stressed the appropriative character of *24 Hour Psycho*, which, in fact, worked as a sort of time-ready-made as intended by Marcel Duchamp.¹⁴ In the end, the collector came up with a viable solution, asking the artist to issue detailed instructions on how to install the piece and perform the slow-motion vision of *Psycho*. Such a request connects Gordon's piece to the tradition of conceptual art in the 1960s. In fact, such artworks question the mechanism of art's private appropriation, since ownership no longer confers the advantage of control over the acquired piece. Seth Siegelaub maintains that – even in the art world – getting hold of an idea can only be done by means of written instructions or some sort of patent: “For if elements of documentary information now constituted the work, then possession of these elements became ownership, and documents became artworks.”¹⁵ Such a strong statement proved true for conceptual art, as it is most interestingly drawn from other artistic disciplines. Indeed, in the literary field or in music, documents are truly artworks, although they function as such only when activated: e.g. when a book is being read or when a music sheet is being played. If *24 Hour Psycho* was to be reduced to its mere instructions, then Gordon had to do this in a way that could be stylistically consistent with previous art historical examples. It was not by chance that, from 1989 to 1993, he had worked mainly with letters of correspondence, text pieces or with the issuing of performance instructions, which were both evocative of the works of established conceptual artists such as On Kawara and Lawrence Weiner.¹⁶ At some point, even ideas appear to require form, which consequently turns the focus back onto the question of style.

When form is an attitude

It is now widely accepted that Harald Szeemann's ground-breaking group show *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) at the Kunsthalle Bern, featuring post-minimalist American and European artists, literally paved

the way for conceptual art, performances and environmental installations.¹⁷ Although these artists and trends rather pertained to a niche in the art world of their time, their input would later flow into the mainstream and influence artists from the late Eighties onwards. Gathered together at Szeemann's exhibition in Switzerland, however, these artists exemplified, first and foremost, what Hal Foster would later define as the gradual conversion of the visual artist into an anthropologist or ethnographer.¹⁸ In his opinion, the most remarkable change in contemporary art is epitomized by the ethnographic turn prompted by the transformation of the artist's role and work practice.¹⁹ Foster was inspired by a convention held in Santa Fé in 1984, when James Clifford and George Marcus acknowledged the transition of academic research towards cross-curricular cultural studies. They inferred that analyzing culture involves three actors: the object of observation, its author and the writer who comments on this cultural product. Describing culture would thus result in an analytical process, which actively involves the observer's beliefs and preconceptions. Hence, ethnographic findings are unavoidably biased and intrinsically subjective, though Marcus and Clifford argue that the ethnographic approach is effective precisely due to its partiality.²⁰ Michel Foucault highlights that analyzing those who are different leads one to self-mirroring.²¹ Foster argues that artists have absorbed this work practice by turning into self-conscious interpreters of culture and favoring a theoretical approach. In this light, the artist would consider culture as a text to be read according to one's own predisposition, exactly like an ethnographer does when describing alien cultures.

According to Foster, the ethnographic turn took place as a reaction to neo-liberalism, which culminated in the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, and to the financial influence on culture. Reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's vision, Foster sees system criticism and self-criticism as the artist's only viable response to prevailing economic, political and cultural forces.²² The roots of this ethnographic approach to visual arts lie in minimalism, performance art and conceptual practices, such as exemplified in *Homes for America* (1966-67) by Dan Graham. The latter would hardly be considered an artwork by mid twentieth-century standards, as it combines journalism and anthropology in a kind of aesthetic and sociological investigation of suburban housing in the United States.²³ What makes such a work particularly attuned to ethnography, besides the inter-disciplinary approach, is its reference to culture, both as a research topic and as a process outcome. Furthermore, the artwork takes context into consideration as a substantial

source of meaning and explanation of cultural facts or artefacts. Eventually, as regards the nature of culture, two separate epistemological visions clearly confront each other: on the one side, a symbolic perspective, which reads culture as a linguistic paradigm, on the other side, a pragmatic stance that appreciates cultural products in the broader context of a given society.

Adopting the view of cultural diversity and the method of cultural studies, contemporary art today bears the marks of this epochal shift.²⁴ Especially in the last two decades of the twentieth century, art practice and the concept of the artwork were crucially affected. As regards artistic procedures, Foster observes a swing from medium-specific labor to a discourse-specific approach. In past centuries, artists remained more or less confined within the inner developments of a particular technique, thus orienting their creative process mainly at previous art historical examples. Hence, when the creative process remains within one specific technique, the artistic workflow is diachronically bound to the art historical evolution of that same medium. More recently, however, visual artists have embraced a working method centered on topics rather than media, therefore involving different artistic disciplines and the exploration of a wide range of issues, even non-artistic ones. When a specific issue is at stake, the technique moves to the background, because the workflow needs free movement across multiple disciplines, while the temporal scope is synchronized to the present. According to Foster, this passage from medium-specificity to discourse-specificity also induces a conceptual and linguistic transformation of the artwork.²⁵ Indeed, he maintains that the 'natural' paradigm, which regards the artwork as a window and the visual image as a necessary representation of the world, has been superseded by the 'cultural' paradigm that conceives the artwork as a text to be deciphered and the visual image as an information network.

Although the nature of the artwork will always be discussed among art historians and theoreticians, what appears to be relevant is what artists believe at a specific time and place or what the convictions of influential players or institutions in the art field are.²⁶ In this regard, the 1980s were a decade of major pedagogical change for contemporary art: both the USA and Great Britain saw the rise of newly conceived visual art departments as opposed to the traditional model of European fine arts academies. What differs between the two is the educational approach: conventional academies were still focused on training students in a specific technique, while departments in the Anglo-American world revolved around more theoretical and inter-disciplinary

courses.²⁷ The emergence of this new educational approach was clearly determined by pervasive changes in visual art such as those initiated in the 1960s, which Foster holds responsible for the ethnographic turn. Indeed, art schools were adapting to a new meaning of art, as well as to a different role of the artist: instead of teaching various techniques to school skilled craftsmen, art education was set to stimulate creativity in order to develop talent on a cross-disciplinary level. The relevance of the educational framework can hardly be overstated, as it constitutes a distinctive trait of the art system for every considered historical period and it crucially influences the professional attitude of artists and their role in society.²⁸ Trends in art education affect even styles over a prolonged period, because schools act as an incubator to several generations of artists, as well as to a strain of different actors, such as critics, curators and dealers.²⁹

The UK experienced an explosion of university enrollments during the 1980s. This also affected art schools, leading to a more varied demographic of gender and social origin among students.³⁰ Furthermore, artistic movements of the late 1960s – especially those informed by process art and performances – had started to question the traditional model of art schools.³¹ Some isolated experiments of reformed art education took place in the 1970s, while they became widely institutionalized in the following decade.³² Two pioneering institutions in this regard were Goldsmiths College in London and Glasgow School of Art, the former having chosen to abolish distinct curricula for each technique, while the latter founded a new department based on the concepts of public art. The story of these art schools is relevant to the particular study case, since most leading YBA artists attended them as students and absorbed their teachings. In particular, some teachers believed that their role was to impart a new attitude to young students: public artist, David Harding, founder of the Environmental Art Department in Glasgow and mentor to students like Douglas Gordon and Christine Borland, and conceptual artist Michael Craig-Martin at Goldsmiths, who trained and supported his pupils, Damien Hirst, Simon Patterson and Sarah Lucas.³³ These teachers had directly participated in the wave of attitudes becoming form – as Szeemann might put it – and were conversely transferring formal aspects through attitudes.

Style caught up between aesthetics, process and narrative

If form can be meant as a specific attitude towards the concept of art and the role of the artist, the question arises as to how style is treated at

an individual and collective level. Being detached from a particular technique, attitude seems impalpable, though it is quite easy to replicate or imitate. Indeed, quotation and even imitation are the first steps from where young artists usually start to find their way among different artistic trends. When the workshop system was in place centuries ago, style would have been transferred to an apprentice directly from his master, since training was based on a mere practical level.³⁴ With academies and art schools, teachers and professors inside the legitimized education system would thus become the central figures for transferring style. However, students are imparted techniques or methods of collective style, though they must later develop their personal interpretation of whatever style they want to reference. On an individual level, artists that have not yet established their position need to find a way to reference previous authors, while finding their signature style. Frequent changes in direction and the referencing of other artists in the production of young artists must be understood as attempts to appropriate a legitimate artistic language and to find one's own interpretation.

The task to shape an individual style within a collective trend or even choosing between competing tendencies in contemporary art is a tough challenge for young artists. They must acquire or develop a signature style that is individual, though at the same time clearly bound to a collective style, being their personal interpretation of that style. This holds true, if the art system is seen as a space of positions where cultural meaning and predominance are at stake, as intended by Pierre Bourdieu.³⁵ In fact, the art world involves numerous players, each with different means and intentions, who struggle for authority inside the field. Predominance in art means conquering the role of legitimate certifier of artistic value.³⁶ Access to the art field is granted to those artists who possess a vast amount of information on the trends and force relations of the field, adapting their production and style to the expected *habitus*.³⁷ However, if capable of seizing the intrinsic preferences and motivations of influential players, artists may rise to be influencers themselves and suggest new artistic developments.³⁸

Inspired by teachers at reformed art schools across the country, young British artists were drawn towards a collective style based on minimalism and conceptual art. When considering the artworks displayed at *Freeze* (1988) – the first self-initiated warehouse show in London curated by Hirst and featuring several Goldsmiths peers³⁹ – the comprehensive conceptual aura of this generation becomes clear, thus placing ideas at the core of the creative procedure with a touch of sensationalism and a minimalist framework. The defining features of this

generation would be conveniently summed up in the term *coolness*, described as a cold, ironic, nihilistic, irreverent and impersonal attitude.⁴⁰ Referring especially to Hirst and the London artists of the 1990s, critic David Cohen observes YBA's particular attention to presentation and to immediate recognition by ironically quoting celebrities and pop stars.⁴¹ Art historian, Julian Stallabrass, maintains that young British artists are characterized by three distinct features: first, the connection to US trends meant to pull British art out of insularism; second, the use of objects and images drawn from mass media culture; third, the presentation of *conceptual* works in a dramatic environment.⁴² The true reference for most *Freeze* contributors was a sort of New York / Cologne international normal style, as defined by critic, Matthew Collings, hence trying to approach conceptual art by formal resemblance, albeit with humor and a sacrilegious attitude.⁴³ Goldsmiths students looked to American artists such as Jeff Koons or British ones like the performer duo, Gilbert and George, who countered British conformism with irony and vulgarity.⁴⁴ The mimicking of conceptual art's aesthetics in London was opposed by the reappropriation of its procedures in Glasgow. Indeed, Gordon, Borland and other Scottish colleagues clustered around the artist-run Transmission gallery referenced instead the intellectual and methodological dimension of this style in order to address the ideological issues that they themselves were interested in.⁴⁵ The Glaswegians were, in fact, referencing the creative process of a style that could be described as post-conceptual, post-minimal and post-*arte povera*.⁴⁶ At first glance, conceptual art provided a common ground for London-based and Glasgow-based artists, a sort of collective style. However, on closer inspection, the former aimed at aesthetic resemblance, while the latter were interested in exploiting the procedural approach.

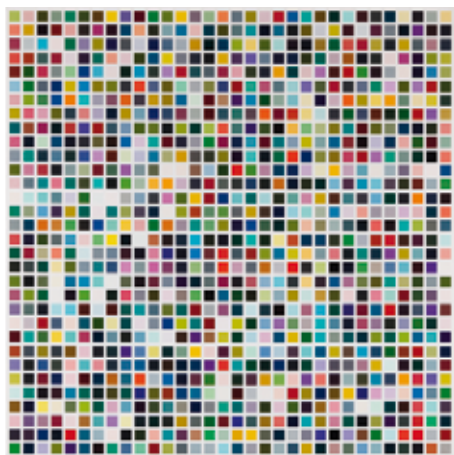
Provided that young British artists collectively acquired a conceptualist style, it is useful to examine how they justified their option in favor of such a paradigm. Picking a particular style must indeed find legitimation in the broader art field, sticking to Bourdieu's theory.⁴⁷ Autobiographical narrative sketched by artists emerges as an instrument of artistic validation, which, in addition, holds a key role in the definition of a signature style. It is helpful to look at artist interviews and authorized biographies of the YBA period to understand how the acquisition of an idea-based style combined with the shaping of the artist persona. Parading the choice of style by means of self-narrative gives an entirely different value to the issue of style, thus amounting to a main feature of the artist's self-understanding and self-representation.

Damien Hirst's epiphany with the work of Jeff Koons at Saatchi's, for instance, turns an individual stance for leadership into a generational claim: "Saatchi was just there at the perfect point with a huge fucking space. [...] And then Saatchi did the New York Show. I remember walking in and going, 'Hey, my eyes!' The whiteness of it! It just blew me away. And it was so not British. And that just totally inspired all the students. We wanted to show at the Saatchi Gallery immediately. And then we started making work really to fit in there."⁴⁸ Christine Borland, on the contrary, sets her individual choice within the context of a collective acquisition of style: "I'd say that most of my friends or artists I hung around with were also working like this. I suppose [that] earlier on we used the language of conceptual art and minimalism more self-consciously. Often, I was dealing with complex issues with different ethical dimensions but I wanted the presentation to be simple, so I also borrowed from the formal language of minimalism or conceptual art, although the basis of the work was more politicized."⁴⁹ Self-narrative is effective also as a means to define precise artistic precedents and account for individual choices within a collective style. As an example, referring to his numerous text pieces dispatched by mail, Douglas Gordon describes the differences between his work and the celebrated postal works of On Kawara: "I just got into the habit of sending them out to various people, some of whom I'd met. I thought there was a nice parallel with On Kawara's postcards, and that it would be good to keep the whole thing going. [...] They are not anonymous. The idea is to project a role that is morally ambiguous [...]. There has to be some kind of relationship between me and the person receiving the letter – it might be that we met casually, or through the art world, or are in a show together, or sometimes it will be people who crop up on the mailing lists of galleries and museums."⁵⁰ Still grounded in autobiographical legitimation, an interview with Sarah Lucas gives voice to frustrations that may come with individual choices within a collective style, when colleagues appear to be more successful: "I lived with Gary Hume. I was reading a lot of feminist writings and that led to arguments, because I was angry with him for being so successful. And not just him, but lots of other people, most of my good friends – but him, being my nearest and dearest, he really got the worst of it."⁵¹ Caught up between aesthetic resemblance, process exploitation and narrative legitimation – style appropriation thus becomes a generational question set at a collective level, from which artists depart when defining their individual signature style.

Style appropriation and its moral boundaries

If formal similarity was the key for many London-based artists to acquire a conceptually defined style, they needed to differentiate their own aesthetic outcome from original pieces they looked at in order to avoid mere copies of works. Broadly, the same applies to their Glaswegian counterparts, who referenced ideas and procedures drawn from conceptual art, where the risk was copying style, instead of developing the conceptual language even further. The problem they faced was respecting moral boundaries that separate homage from plagiarism, reference from copy, originality from imitation, appropriation and piracy. An established style appears to be an intellectual property, though a collective one that can be referenced, re-used or torn to pieces, if needed. It is particularly interesting to investigate appropriation strategies of young artists, such as the case of YBAs in the 1990s, since they must legitimize their stylistic choices in such a way that can be accepted by the art establishment. While experimenting with styles and experiencing moral boundaries, an artist must be able to justify aesthetic as well as conceptual choices and to provide convincing outcomes. Style appropriation is usually a means to approach global trends and employ established artistic languages. In the case of young British artists, referencing conceptual art was seen as the best solution to get out of the periphery.⁵² There are different means to translate new styles at local level and these students tried several ways to find convenient strategies to develop their individual artistic project or even a signature style, while staying within art's moral boundaries.⁵³

Set against the backdrop of Jeff Koons' basketballs vitrine, the pickled tiger shark of 1992 demonstrates the path of aesthetic resemblance chosen by Damien Hirst. Even before producing this example for Charles Saatchi, the artist had carefully gone through the catalogues of various celebrated artists, in order to find examples for direct inspiration.⁵⁴ While working as a technician at London's renowned Anthony d'Offay gallery, Hirst came across a work by the German painter, Gerhard Richter.⁵⁵ The young student was struck by a catalogue image of *1024 Colours* (1973), which simply displays a geometric color chart that is 32 units high by 32 units wide, making a total of 1024 rectangles of different colored units in a white grid, as if taken from a hardware store brochure. This encounter inspired Hirst to start an on-going series called *Spot Paintings* (fig. 1), recently shown in a retrospective at various venues of Gagosian Gallery.⁵⁶ The works consist of white canvasses depicting geometrically arranged color circles made of average household



1 Left: Gerhard Richter, *1024 Farben*, 1973, from *Gerhard Richter. Bilder = Paintings 1962–1985* (exhibition catalogue, ed. DuMont), Cologne 1986, p. 174.
Right: Damien Hirst, *Argininosuccinic Acid (Spot Painting)*, 1995, from *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (exhibition catalogue London), ed. Norman Rosenthal, London 1998, p. 95

gloss. The paintings were meant as a transposition of Richter's works into a series that looked sufficiently cool and was conveniently repeatable in infinite variations. For the third part of *Freeze*, Hirst applied the spots directly on a whitewashed wall of the Surrey Docks, arranging them as two nearly identical rectangles of ten by fifteen circles and titling the piece *John, John* (1988)⁵⁷, while he later converted to pharmaceutical names.⁵⁸ The *Spot Paintings* are an 'imitation game', since they directly refer to and exploit a celebrated piece of international art. Near copies of Richter's works, they function as 'variations' of the original ones. Hirst's imitative strategy proved successful, but it is a dangerous game, because the resulting artworks risk looking like mere copies of an authentic piece of art.

In his art school years, Douglas Gordon went on a different path as regards appropriation of a conceptual style. His very first durational performances of the late 1980s are overtly reminiscent of the poetics and ephemeral methods employed by Joseph Beuys, although they do not intend to imitate the aesthetic idea or the formal output of the renowned German artist.⁵⁹ Instead, the young Glaswegian was stepping into the shoes of Beuys, becoming a sort of follower and developing his style even further. This kind of disciple-attitude becomes clearer with Gordon's text-pieces applied onto walls or sent out by letter, which formally reference works by renowned American conceptual artists of the 1970s.⁶⁰ In 1989, Gordon applied the sentence *Forget Facts and Figures* (1989) to the windows of an abandoned industrial plant in Bremen, which is reminiscent of the objective mural texts by Lawrence Weiner. For the work *Proof* (1990) he attached a series of years (1787,

1812, 1820, 1916, 1922 and 1932) onto the facade of the former Glasgow Green Station, which recalls On Kawara's *Today Series* (1966 onwards) made of newspaper boxes imprinted with the release date. After 1991, Gordon began regularly sending letters and faxes, exploiting a paramount strategy of 1970s conceptual art. It was in homage to earlier artists as well as the only viable tactic for a young artist located on the outskirts of the art world to make his name known abroad.⁶¹ The letters created a certain intimacy with the addressee and were sent to curators, critics, dealers and collectors. By use of the postal system, Gordon draws a clear parallel to On Kawara's *I am still alive* (1973 onwards) series of telegrams. While the Japanese artist merely communicated his own state of mind or physical condition, Gordon stirred a direct response from the reader with ambiguous or disturbing sentences (fig. 2). The young Glaswegian seized 'legacy acquisition' that granted him complete access to the methods of a conceptual style from which he could then take the liberty to depart.⁶² When referring to the initiators of Art & Language, a group of British conceptual artists founded by Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, Gordon maintains they provided a language that his generation could exploit: "[...] these people set up a vocabulary, an aesthetic, which our generation has carried on with in the way we present our ideas – even if they are completely different from those Atkinson, Baldwin and Ramsden were interested in. But this is something positive, because it means that the vocabulary is not static, that it changes with the generations."⁶³ Gordon and many of his Glaswegian colleagues did not copy any work or style, but rather tried to acquire the working method of conceptual art, making it their own. Such an appropriation strategy is quite difficult to operate, as an artist needs to gain a profound understanding of the referenced styles. The risk is that of being seen as a mere follower of another artist or of a certain style, instead of being regarded as a proper innovator.

Returning to the *Freeze* exhibition, another artist in the show, Simon Patterson, received much critical acclaim for his conceptually inspired works. Simon Patterson displayed two works that "[...] bore all of the hallmarks of the Goldsmiths standards, referencing conceptual 'high art' while at the same time being somewhat irreverent and down to earth."⁶⁴ During the three-part exhibition, the young Goldsmiths student showed two textual works that made use of language intended as a system of signifiers, rather than relying on its significant dimension.⁶⁵ Patterson placed two white canvasses with black letterings side by side, one bearing the name Richard Burton and the other one



2 Left: On Kawara, *I Got Up*, 1978, from *On Kawara: continuity/discontinuity, 1963-1979* (exhibition catalogue Moderna Museet, ed. Björn Springfeldt), Stockholm 1980, p. 107.
Right: Douglas Gordon, *Letter (Number 14)*, 1994, from Katrina Brown, *DG: Douglas Gordon*, London 2004, p. 19

Elizabeth Taylor, the piece being titled *Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor* (1988). With their minimal appearance, these two paintings are aesthetically reminiscent of On Kawara's *Today Series*, as they mimic the presentation style of the latter, rather than adopting the same creative procedure (fig. 3). Similarly, he then applied letters onto the white-washed wall to compose the names of Christ and the twelve apostles, organized as if they are arranged in a football formation. Humorously titled *The Last Supper Arranged According to the Flat Back Four Formation (Jesus Christ in Goal)* (1988) this text-piece is reminiscent of the sort of tautological representations as seen in Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965): indeed, the title describes exactly what the artist displayed, which is placing the names of the apostles as they might appear in a sports newspaper. Conceived as word puns, Patterson's works employed conceptual art and minimalism at an aesthetic level, although subverting their inner seriousness by replacing its contents with elements drawn from popular culture. In fact, the final effect of both pieces is self-referential, but the gravity is lightened up by means of impertinence towards high-art. Furthermore, the logical structure of the verbal system used retains consistency, but ironically plays upon collective imagination in a society conditioned by the mass media.⁶⁶ The appropriation strategy of Simon Patterson may be defined in terms of 'critical parody', the artist mocking the referenced style and ironically commenting on it. However, this attitude is very risky, because joking could lead artists to undermine the seriousness of their own works.



A few conclusions on style as a common currency

The previous paragraphs attempted to provide a clearer view on style meant as intellectual property in contemporary art. First and foremost, style was considered from the perspective of artists, particularly young ones, who need to find their legitimate approach to the art world. The case of UK's young British artists of the late twentieth century provided an excellent opportunity to analyze historically concrete appropriation strategies and working attitudes. Given the impact of Foster's so-called ethnographic turn in the art system and later, in art education, this research claims that the acquisition of a collective mind-set predates and fosters communal style choices at a generational level, even in the case of a style defined by mere ideas and attitudes, rather than form or aesthetics. Self-narrative emerged as a means of legitimation, both for the appropriation of a collective style, as well as for the definition of a signature style established in an artist's biography. Finally, this research tested appropriation strategies against moral boundaries in contemporary art in order to understand where the difference lies between reference and copy, between homage and straightforward plagiarism.

Concerning the latter point, three different attitudes were highlighted that can be applied by artists when shaping their signature style, although with different rates of success and various risks. The paper argues that Damien Hirst appears to be an imitator who mimicked conceptual art and minimalism, giving his personal variation of these established styles. Douglas Gordon, instead, acted as a follower who would acquire the entire legacy of a conceptual style and process art, in order to develop this trend even further. Simon Patterson, in contrast, took on the role of a mocking bird, staging a polished and ironic parody of the referenced style in order to joke with structures and languages. These appropriation strategies are very similar to behavioral models in the case of innovation reception in management studies. Indeed,

3 Left: On Kawara, *Today (Series)*, 1970–2000, from *On Kawara: continuity/discontinuity, 1963–1979* (exhibition catalogue Moderna Museet), ed. Björn Springfeldt, Stockholm 1980, p. 78. Right: Simon Patterson, *Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton*, 1988, from *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (exhibition catalogue London), ed. Norman Rosenthal, London 1998, p. 142.

institutional theorists, like Alfred Chandler, observe that successful novelties at an organizational level expand in the wider industrial system, passing from one company to another.⁶⁷ Firms watch out for best practices in labor organization and often adopt the institutional structure of such enterprises that are considered an established authority in their own field. Interestingly, appropriating a specific organizational model doesn't necessarily depend on its functional superiority or on the expected economic advantages. On the contrary, the decision whether to adopt an institutional solution relies on the reputation of the referenced company. The adoption of marketing departments in museums, for instance, propagated in the 1990s, became unavoidable for institutions that wanted to be perceived as innovative or up-to-date. However experts maintain that marketing is best kept as a transversal function through the entire organization, instead of being concentrated in a separate department.⁶⁸ It thus becomes apparent that appropriation strategies can be driven by firm belief or moral obligation, by lazy routine or cynical convenience.

This example elucidates the attitude with which young artists approach the issue of style – or at least how many of the YBA generation engaged with the problem of devising a signature style within a collective tendency. Despite all due differences as regards style reception, Hirst, Gordon and Patterson all tried to absorb and rephrase established trends that suited their artistic aims. This research may not have come up with an exhaustive definition of style in contemporary art, but it has made clearer what style might mean to contemporary artists and how they tackle this issue in their daily practice. Be it aesthetic resemblance or procedural similarity, formal copy or conceptual affinity – style emerges as an artistic tool in the palette of contemporary artists in order to define their place inside the art field as well as their role in society. The idea of style outlined by YBAs appears still to be present and consistent in today's art world, which Gordon has poignantly summed up: "It's a simple analogy, but it's like trying to identify the common currency for people, you're travelling through the world, making art, you are showing it to different people, if you're just a professional traveler, what's the currency you want to travel with? [...] Being Scottish we get this all the time, we try and pass off a Scottish pound note, and people won't accept it, because that's not the common currency."⁶⁹

If style functions as a currency, an artist must consciously adopt one – and it had better be a fairly common one that allows communication with a wide art audience... though beware of forgery!

- 1 Reference is made to the artwork *Three Balls Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985) by Jeff Koons displayed at the group show *NY Art Now* (1987), Saatchi Gallery, London.
- 2 Reference is made to the artwork *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) displayed at the group show *Young British Artists* (1992), Saatchi Gallery, London.
- 3 Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite. The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, London 2006; Matthew Collings, *Blimey! From Bohemia to Britpop: London Art World from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst*, London 1997; Gregor Muir, *Lucky Kunst. The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, London 2011.
- 4 Matthew Slotover, "Windfall: Northern Lights", *Frieze*, 1 (1991); Craig Richardson, *Scottish Art since 1960: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Overviews*, Farnham 2011; Sarah Lowndes, *Social Sculpture: The Rise of the Glasgow Art Scene*, Glasgow 2010.
- 5 Rosalind Krauss, "Informe without conclusion", in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, 1st ed. 1996, Malden 2013, pp. 118–130.
- 6 Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Policy of Publicity*, Boston 2003, p. 11 f. and p. 41 f.
- 7 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 1–71.
- 8 Foster 1996 (note 7), pp. 132–146.
- 9 Diego Mantoan, *The Road to Parnassus. Artist Strategies in Contemporary Art*, Wilmington 2015, pp. 259–279.
- 10 *24 Hour Psycho: Hitchcock's Tomb* (exhibition catalogue Glasgow), ed. Stuart Morgan, Glasgow 1993.
- 11 Harald Fricke, "Introduction: Confusion in Noir", in *Déjà-vu: Questions & Answers*, ed. Douglas Gordon, 3 vols., 1996–1998, vol. 2, 1st ed. 1998, Paris 2000, p. 29 f.
- 12 Andrew Renton, "Douglas Gordon: Tramway", *Flash Art International*, 26, 172 (1993), p. 93; Ross Sinclair, "Douglas Gordon", *Art Monthly*, 167 (1993), p. 22 f.; Mark Sladen, "Spellbound: Art and Film", *Art Monthly*, 195 (1996), pp. 25–27.
- 13 Mantoan 2015 (note 9), p. 276.
- 14 Hans Ulrich Obrist, "(P)ars pro toto", in *Déjà-vu: Questions & Answers*, ed. Douglas Gordon, 3 vols., 1992–1996, vol. 1, 1st ed. 1996, Paris 2000, pp. 168 f.
- 15 Seth Siegelaub, in Alberro 2003 (note 6), p. 74.
- 16 *prettymucheverywordwritten, spoken, heard, overheard from 1989* (exhibition catalogue Rovereto), ed. Mirta D'Argenzio and Giorgio Verzotti, Milan 2006.
- 17 On September 2nd and 3rd, 2016, on the occasion of Kunsthalle Bern's centennial celebration, an international conference was held at University of Bern on the topic "KUNSTHALLEN. Architectures for the Continuous Contemporary in Europe and the US", which dealt extensively with Harald Szeemann's 1969 exhibition. Cfr. Peter Schneemann (Hrsg.), *Localizing the Contemporary: The Kunsthalle Bern as a Model*, ed. by Peter Schneemann, Zurich 2018.
- 18 Foster 1996 (note 7), pp. 62–65.
- 19 Vittorio Gravano, "Il critico come etnografo? Il posizionamento nella scrittura da Santa Fé ad Hal Foster", *Art'O*, 24, 10 (2007). See also: <http://1995-2015.undo.net/it/magazines/1201016463> (accessed 03.01.2018).
- 20 James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Los Angeles 1986, p. 32.
- 21 Foucault argues that the authentic trait of Western civilisation for the twentieth century was the tendency to seek truth in what is unexpected, unconscious and different. In his view, this would explain the rise into prominence of psychoanalysis and anthropology as prevailing research methods of the time. Michel Foucault, *L'ordine del discorso*, 1st ed. 1972, Turin 2004.
- 22 Foster 1996 (note 7), p. 171 f.
- 23 Gregor Stemmerich, *Dan Graham*, Cologne 2008.
- 24 Valentina Lusini, "Arte contemporanea a cultura dell'alterità", *Studi Culturali*, 1, 8 (2011), p. 93.
- 25 Foster 1996 (note 7), p. 202.
- 26 Nathalie Heinich, "Objets, problématique, terrains, méthodes: pour un pluralisme méthodique", in *Sociologie de l'art*, ed. Raymonde Moulin, Paris 1999, p. 26.
- 27 Angela Vettese, *Ma questo è un quadro? Il valore nell'arte contemporanea*, Rome 2007, p. 30.
- 28 See for example: Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries*, Oxford 1979.
- 29 Bruno Frey, *Arts & Economics: Analysis & Cultural Policy*, Berlin 2000, p. 28.

- 30** Bolton, "Education: Historical statistics", *Social & General Statistics*, 27, 11 (2012), pp. 11–14; Dan Fox, "Then and Now, British Art and the 1990s", *Frieze*, 159 (2013).
- 31** David Harding, "Another History. Memories and Vagaries: the Development of Social Art Practices in Scotland from the 60s to the 90s", in *Art with People*, ed. Malcolm Dickson, Sunderland 1995, p. 1.
- 32** Chris Crickmay, "Art and Social Context: Contextual Art Practice in Education", *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2, 3 (2003).
- 33** Brian Sherwin, "Interview with Michael Craig-Martin", *Art Space Talk*, 16, 8 (2007).
- 34** Burke 1979 (note 28), p. 37.
- 35** Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 12–15.
- 36** Pierre Bourdieu, "The Intellectual Field: A World Apart", in Kocur/Leung 2013 (note 5), pp. 13–20.
- 37** Bourdieu 1993 (note 35), p. 31f.
- 38** Heinich 1999 (note 26), p. 26.
- 39** The warehouse show Freeze, one of the first do-it-yourself group exhibitions organised in the London docklands, was held in the Surrey Docks from August 6th to September 29th, 1988. Curated by Damien Hirst, Angus Fairhurst and Abigail Lane the show featured about twenty Goldsmiths students of different age groups in three separate parts. See: Muir 2011 (note 3); Jeremy Cooper, *Growing up: the Young British Artists at 50*, Munich 2012.
- 40** Stallabrass 2006 (note 3), p. 107.
- 41** David Cohen, "Letter from London: Sensation", *Artnet.com*, 24, 10 (1997).
- 42** Stallabrass 2006 (note 3), p. 4.
- 43** Collings 1997 (note 3), p. 31.
- 44** Stallabrass 2006 (note 3), p. 56
- 45** Founded in 1983 as an artist-run gallery, in 1989 the steering committee passed to Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland and other graduates of Glasgow School of Art's Environmental Art Department. These young artists transformed the gallery in an alternative art space that organised group shows of local artists and invited celebrated artists for solo shows and conferences, such as Lawrence Wiener. See: Lowndes 2010 (note 4), Richardson 2011 (note 4).
- 46** Richardson 2011 (note 4), p. 9 and p. 147.
- 47** Bourdieu (1990) 2013 (note 36), p. 13.
- 48** Damien Hirst, in Anthony Haden Guest, "Damien Hirst – Fresh from Auctioning More Than 200 Pieces of his Work", *Interview Magazine*, 10 (2008), p. 155.
- 49** Christine Borland, in Rebecca Fortnum, *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words*, Tauris 2007, p. 11.
- 50** Douglas Gordon, in Thomas Lawson, "Unrelating Jet Lag and Iron Hard Jets", in *The British Art Show 4* (exhibition catalogue London), ed. Richard Cork, Rose Finn-Kelcey and Thomas Lawson, London 1995, p. 95.
- 51** Sarah Lucas, in Matthew Collings, *SL: Sarah Lucas*, London 2002, p. 22.
- 52** Mantoan 2015 (note 9), pp. 203–220.
- 53** Michele Dantini, *Geopolitiche dell'arte. Arte e critica d'arte italiana nel contesto internazionale dalle neoavanguardie a oggi*, Milan 2012, p. 72, p. 99 and p. 119.
- 54** Michael Craig-Martin, "Damien Hirst: The Early Years", in *Damien Hirst* (exhibition catalogue London), ed. Anna Gallagher, London 2012, p. 38.
- 55** Muir 2011 (note 3), pp. 18–36.
- 56** Reference is made to the exhibition *The Complete Spot Paintings 1986–2011* (2012).
- 57** More recently the title has been converted into *Row and Edge*. See: <http://www.damienhirst.com/texts1/series/spots> (accessed 04.01.2018).
- 58** Stuart Morgan, "The Butterfly Effect", in *What the Butler Saw*, ed. Ian Hunt, London 1996.
- 59** Richardson 2011 (note 4), p. 9 and p. 138.
- 60** Gregor Stemmerich, "Kopfbahnhof" in *Kopfbahnhof/Terminal* (exhibition catalogue Leipzig), ed. Klaus Werner, Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmerich, Leipzig 1995, p. 18.
- 61** Obrist 2000 (note 14), p. 160.
- 62** Giorgio Verzotti, "Douglas Gordon", in *prettymucheverywordwritten, spoken, heard, overheard from 1989 2006* (note 16), p. 15.
- 63** Douglas Gordon, in Simon Sheikh, "Art is Merely an Excuse for Communicating", in *Déjà-vu: Questions & Answers* (1997) 2000 (note 11), p. 19.
- 64** Muir 2011 (note 3), p. 22.
- 65** Andy Beckett, "Is There Life after the Dead Cow?", *Independent on Sunday*, 27, 10 (1996), pp. 18–22.
- 66** Fred Shepherd, "Trust in me", *The List*, 15, 11 (1996).
- 67** Alfred D. Chandler, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise*, Cambridge 1969.

68 Diego Mantoan, “Manager e cambiamento organizzativo alla Biennale di Venezia”, *Economia & Management*, 2 (2008), pp. 89–100.

69 Douglas Gordon, in Graham Fagen, “The exact vague history”, in *Déjà-vu: Questions & Answers* (1999) 2000 (note 11), p. 111.