

Magritte and the Triumph of the Simulacrum

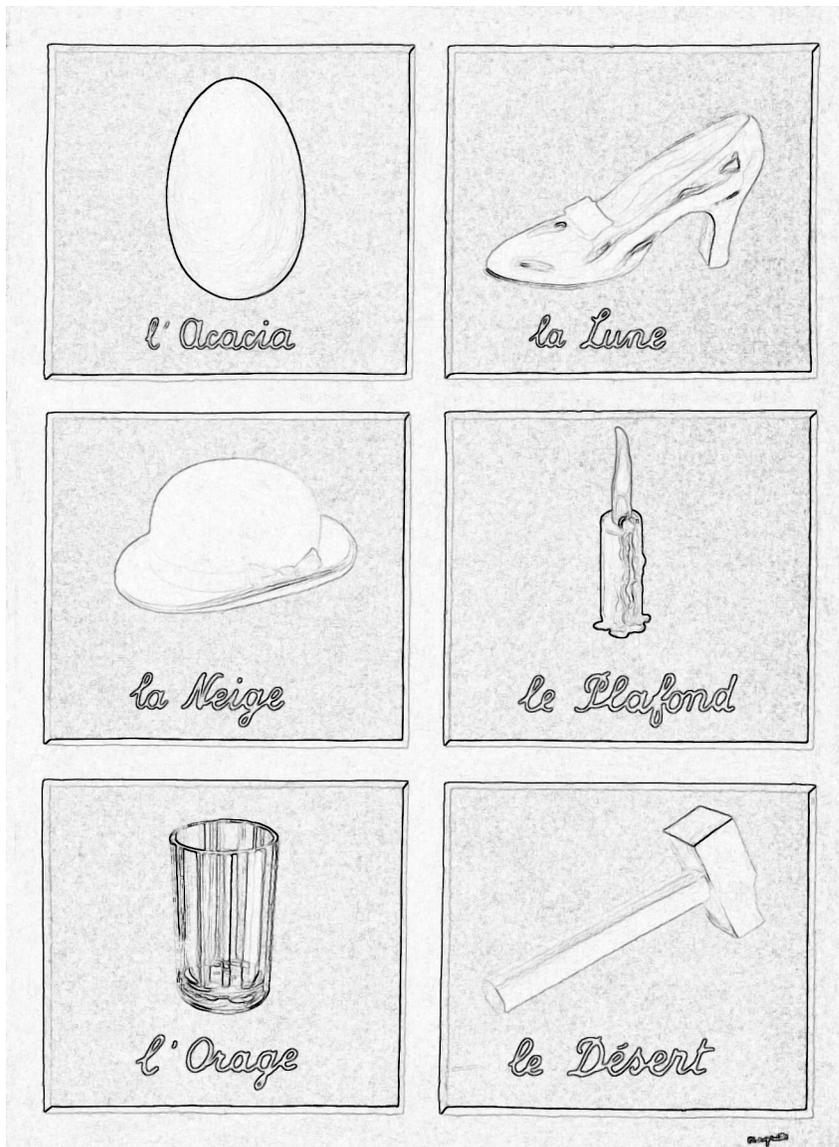
Mark Levy

In *La Trahison des images* – *The Treason of images* (1927-1928) – Rene Magritte draws attention to the gap between image and reality (Fig. 1).



Here a painted image of a pipe is not a real pipe as the caption “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*” affirms. In the words of the French linguistic philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) there is a difference between the “signifier” or sign, and the “signified”, or object (Saussure, 2011, 68-73). The signifier or sign is a simulacrum of the real thing. Of course, as Magritte demonstrates, the viewer often suspends disbelief in the reality of the signified and this is especially telling in *La Trahison des images*, as the image of a pipe is simply a colored cartoon with modeling.

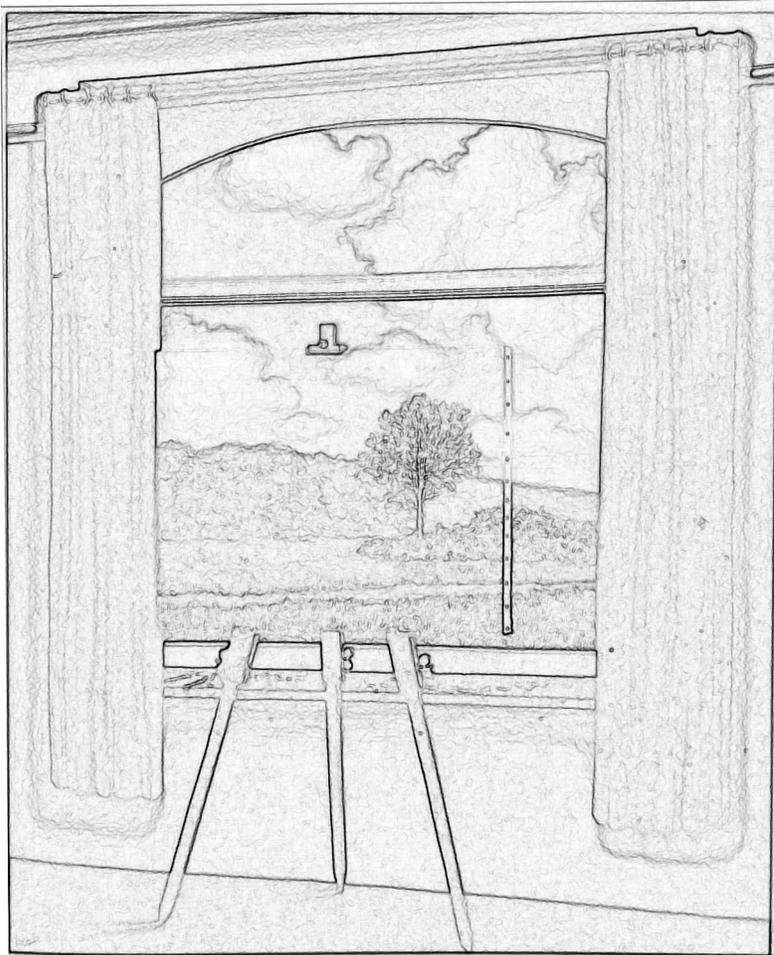
In *La Clef des songes* – *The Key of dreams* (1930) – Magritte also shows that words, the equivalent of images, are similarly arbitrary designations of things (Fig 2).



An image of a glass, for example could just as easily be called “L’ Orage” which is usually designated to mean storm in French. As Saussure had already affirmed, signification is always determined by culture; there is no natural relation between the signifier and the signified. Although Saussure believed that the relation between signifier and signified is essentially arbitrary, later twentieth century thinkers such as Roland Barthes, in his *Mythologies* (1957), show that all signification is ideological. As I hope to demonstrate with examples from the work of Barbara Kruger, Vitaly Komar, and Alexander Melamid, Magritte’s paintings anticipate the deconstructionist trope of adding or changing signifiers to bring out the hidden ideology behind so called natural signification. The reality of the signified is thus brought into question. Moreover, Magritte was a precursor

of the free play of signifiers without signifieds that is found in the postmodernist works of such artists as Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Sigmar Polke, etc. In beginning to pry loose the natural link between the signifier and the signified Magritte anticipates the triumph of the simulacrum, and the erosion of the real in late 20th and early 21st century art and culture.

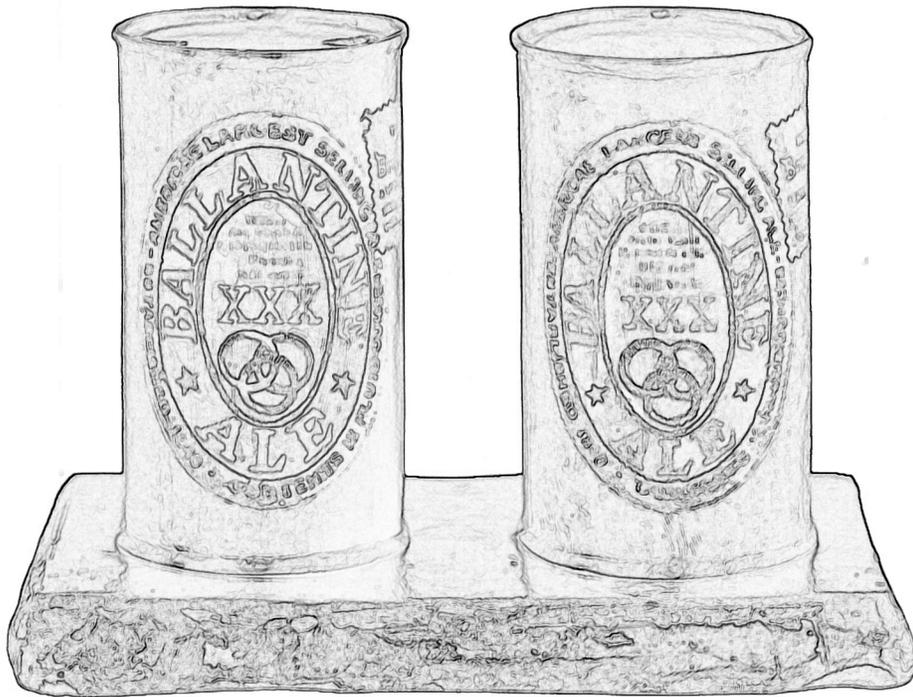
For surrealists Magritte, there is no important difference between the consciousness of waking reality, dream reality, and artistic reality; these realities are presented to the mind as images, none of which is privileged. In *La Condition Humaine – The Human Condition* (1934) – Magritte depicts a painting of a landscape, and the landscape that is the subject of the painting in the painting behind it (Fig. 3):



It cannot be said that either the painting on the easel or the landscape is closer to the real. There is simply an infinite regression of images – essential abstract signifiers, including our mental idea of landscape – which

makes the signification possible. To use Immanuel Kant's terminology, there are only appearances; it is an epistemological impossibility to arrive at the *ding an sich*, the thing in itself. According to Jacques Derrida, these appearances are endlessly recycled signs; "There is nothing outside the text," he exclaimed (Derrida, 1976, 158). To be sure, Derrida was thinking about words as signifiers, which are perhaps more abstract than images. For Magritte in *La Clef des songes*, however, they are essentially equivalent.

The primacy of the signifier in Magritte's painting is also emphasized in Pop Art. Jasper Johns's *Painted Bronze II* (1964), for example, is a bronze sculpture representing a Balantine's ale can with a painted logo (Fig. 4).



Johns invites us to discover the gap between the hand-painted bronze sculpture and the actual ale can. Although this sculpture is closer to an ale can than Magritte's image is to a pipe, the Balantine's ale can itself is a signifier that advertises ale rather than simply a container. Many of the Pop Artists had backgrounds in commercial art and advertising. They learned that a bold packaging design, the signifier, sells a product, however negligible in value. The signified is ultimately unimportant. Indeed, the delivery vehicle for Balantine's ale gives more visual sensory satisfaction

than the taste of this rather insipid brew. This is also true of the Campbell Soup can, immortalized by Andy Warhol in his silk screens; the promises of gustatory pleasure offered by the packaging are belied by the actual taste of the product. The sign trumps the actual soup.

And the proliferation of images, characteristic of later 20th century American culture, has a leveling effect on signification as Warhol also understood. In Warhol's celebrity multiples where a head or torso is repeated many times, Ethel Scull, the wife of a principal Warhol collector, becomes as important as Mao Tse Tung. Celebrity, the product of media exposure, eclipses fame, which may be based on real achievements. For Andy Warhol, everyone can be famous for 15 minutes.

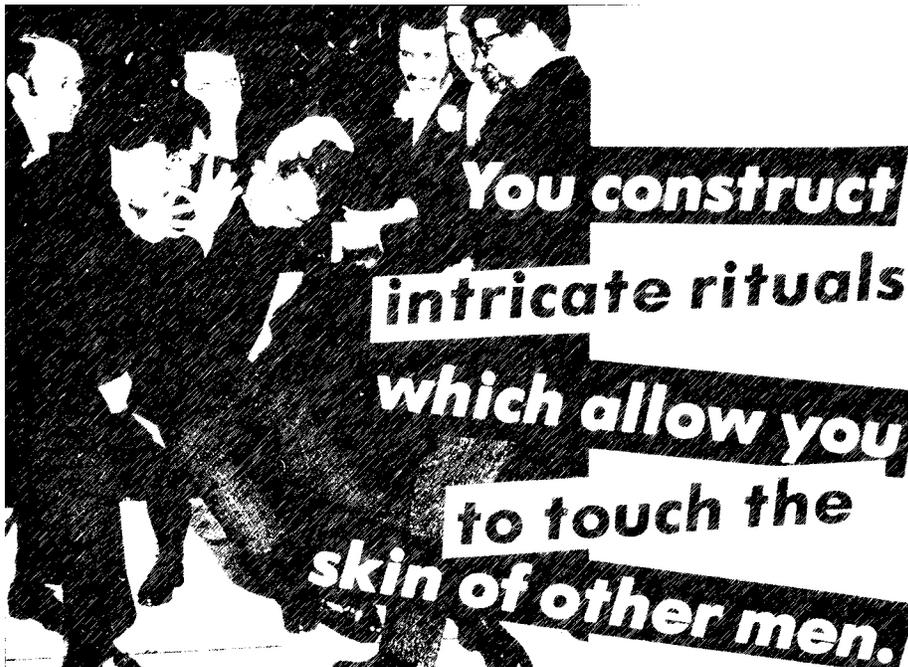
This erosion of meaning occurs with even the most charged images. The repetition of electric chairs or car disasters in Warhol's other multiples, a repetition that echoes the constant barrage of violent images in the media, creates a collapse of distinctions that leads to a moral numbing as the observer loses his or her empathy over time. This "image implosion of the media...where there is no hope for meaning," as Jacques Baudrillard argues, is a prominent feature of the postmodern condition of contemporary life (Baudrillard, 1995, 161, 164). Implosion engenders a virtual reality of images in which reality and simulacra are hopelessly confused and the simulacrum precedes reality. These phenomena are explained in Baudrillard's famous article "The Precession of Simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1995, 1-42).

Rather than quoting from this article, I want to relate an anecdote that I think best illustrates Baudrillard's ideas. Years ago, while taking advantage of a fellowship to study the Senoi dream masters of Malaysia, I took a boat ride with two anthropologists down a tributary in the jungle to the location of this tribe. At the end of this rather extraordinary three-day journey one of the anthropologists said to me, "This was just like the jungle ride in Disneyland except it was real". For this anthropologist, the experience of the jungle ride in Disneyland, a simulacrum of a jungle ride, had framed his experience of the actual jungle ride – the simulacrum preceded reality. For Baudrillard this has reached the point in contemporary life where there are only isolated outposts of the real or "deserts of the real" (Baudrillard, 1995, 1).

Imagine the life of a software designer in Silicon Valley: he gets up in the morning and has instant oatmeal – a simulacrum of food; then spends all day

on the computer; eats fast food take out all day – more simulacra of food; comes home at night and gets on the internet – plays video games, watches films, etc.; and instead of real sex, he indulges in online pornography. When and where does the real intrude upon his life?

Whatever “deserts of the real” exist they are always mediated by an ideology. Perhaps Frederick Nietzsche’s statement that “there are no facts, only interpretations” (Quoted in Kaufman, 1976, 458) says this best. And deconstructionist and postmodernist artists have taken up Nietzsche’s aphorism. In Barbara Kruger’s *Untitled* (1981), a ready made photographic image with superimposed words, there can be agreement on some of the basic facts or meanings derived from the shapes, but neutrality cannot be maintained beyond this level of signification (Fig 5).



The facts depicted in the photograph are as follows: a group of men wearing carnations in their lapels are smiling and touching one other. Yet by adding a new set of signifiers in the form of the words superimposed over the image: “You construct intricate rituals to touch the flesh of other men” Kruger deconstructs the normal or natural signification of men having a good time at what appears to be some sort of bachelor party. Kruger’s new signification is that in a culture where homosexuality is still taboo in many places, this type of situation is the only way that men can touch each other. Here Kruger dramatically points to the idea that all signification is an ideological construct.

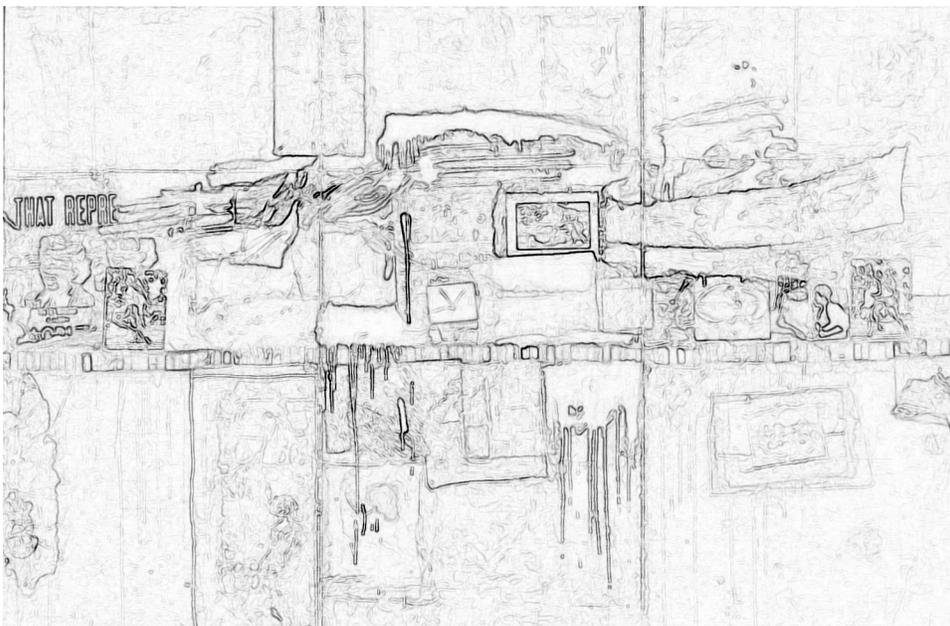
Another example of this ideological unmasking of signification by the deconstructionists in the visual arts is *Discobolus* (1983) by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid (Fig. 6).



Many generations of individuals educated in the Western classical tradition have reified the sculpture – it is actually a Roman copy in the Naples Museum of an original by the Athenian artist Myron, depicting the paradigm of the heroic man in action. By adding a Nazi armband, an enormous blue penis to the sculpture, changing the color to brown, and disintegrating the head in a cascade of painterly effects, Komar and Melamid reveal the shadow side of Greek culture.

It is not surprising that *Discobolus* was one Hitler's favorite sculptures. For him it exemplified the superiority of a white male patriarchal culture. Foreigners and even inhabitants of other Greek city-states were considered barbarians and forced into slavery when conquered by the Athenians. For centuries, both scholars and the educated public conveniently ignored these aspects of Greek culture – including homosexuality – celebrated by no less an authority than Plato. As typical deconstructionists, Komar and Melamid say what isn't normally said about this sculpture by adding new signifiers. They show that the Greek ideal, which became the reality of Greek culture for many observers, is an illusion.

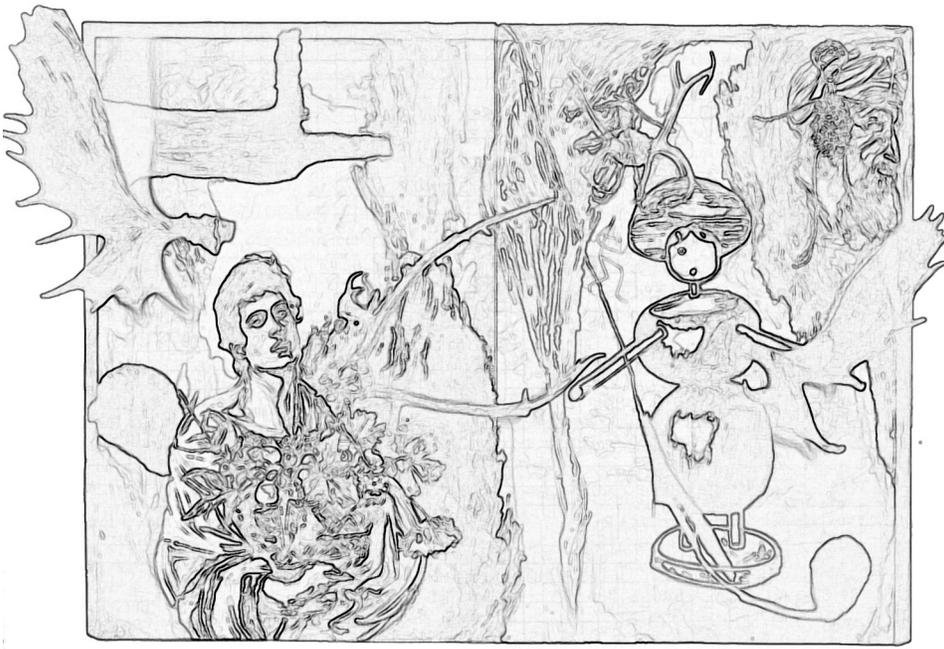
Postmodernist artists go further than the deconstructionists in eroding the real by means of the free play of signifiers. Although the "Combine Paintings" of Robert Rauschenberg antecede postmodernism, this body of his work is a good example of multiplication of signifiers without signifieds. In *Rebus* (1955) reproductions of works of art, cartoons, paint splatters reminiscent of abstract expressionism, newspaper photographs, etc., are torn from their original context losing their original meaning (Fig. 7).



This assortment of images does not engender a discernible overall meaning, either a narrative or a meta-narrative. Here meaning is subsumed or delayed in the purely aesthetic enjoyment of the signifiers. This essential postmodernist trope is encapsulated in Derrida's term *differánce*, an

intentional misspelling of Saussure's idea of difference (Derrida, 1982, 43). For Saussure language functions because signifiers are different, not because the signifier itself has any intrinsic meaning. According to Derrida, however, meaning is never recouped and the hankering after meaning or the real for that matter – although a characteristic of western philosophy – has become dispensable.

In the postmodernist paintings of Julian Schnabel it is hard to discern a purpose. *Exile* (1980) is a collection of cartoons, antlers, drawings based on the paintings of famous artists, splashes of paint, drawings, etc. (Fig. 8).



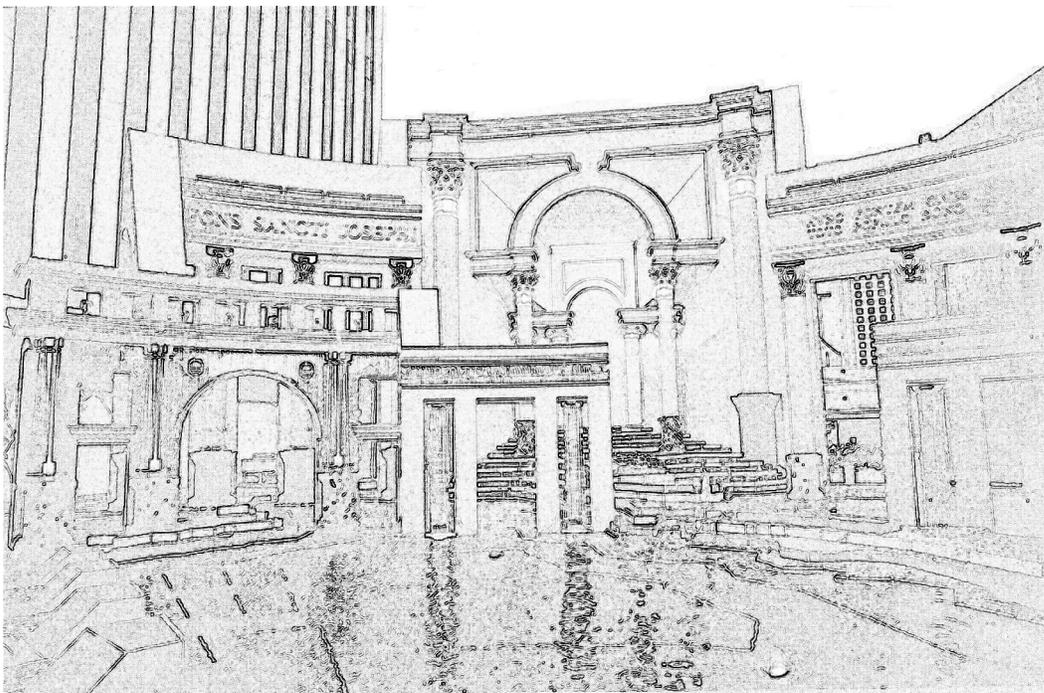
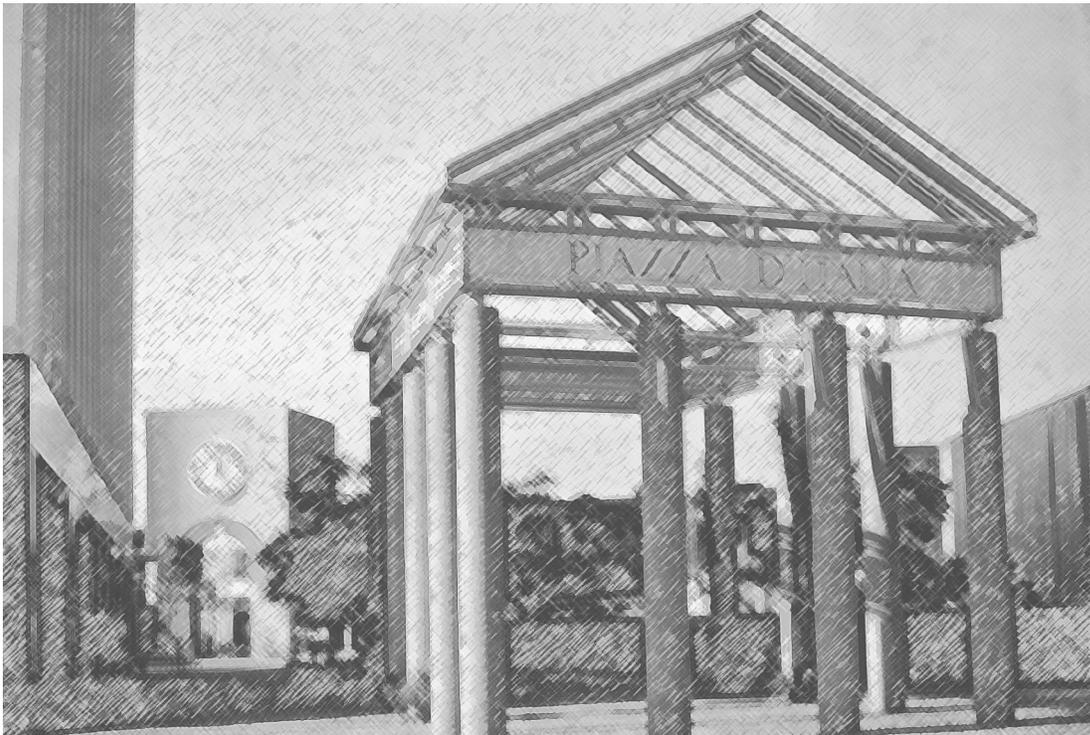
This work is a delirious mixture of kitsch and high art, quotation, and invention that offers only immanent polymorphous satisfaction.

Meaning is also deferred in postmodernist architecture and even the postmodernist city. For the perimeter Robert Gehry's private home in Santa Monica, California the architect has taken a fence and a window, which usually have very distinct functions, and used them quote literally as free floating signifiers without a function or a signification (Fig. 9).



In Piazza d' Italia (1978), architect Charles Moore has employed a seemingly willy-nilly combination of classical forms with neon, glossy steel

materials, and bright colors, to construct an entrance-way to a shopping mall in New Orleans (Fig. 10, 11, 12).





At the entrance to the Piazza is a small empty classical temple without walls that is symptomatic of the whole endeavor – a shell absent of meaning other than a flashy invitation to buy.

An absence rather than a presence characterizes postmodernist cities such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles. Las Vegas is a city of signs promising an easily obtainable happiness. Why go to Paris to see the Statue of Liberty when there is a simulacrum in a hotel in Las Vegas? The U.S. Postal Department used the head from the Vegas fiberglass and Styrofoam replica

for a stamp rather than the Statue of Liberty in N.Y, perhaps because it is less grimy than the original (Fig 13).



Of course, the real Statue of Liberty in N.Y continues to function as just a sign that advertises liberty and freedom for immigrants, and confirms American values for citizens.

Los Angeles is another postmodernist city that constantly bombards inhabitants and visitors alike with buildings and advertisements that are signs. It is often difficult to distinguish the two. L.A lacks a center, presenting instead an anarchic sprawl of freeways, shopping, and cultural centers. Its main “industries” are Hollywood production companies that fabricate film and celebrity images, and shopping malls that promote expensive brand name items – signs of wealth and status. In this city of

surfaces “there is no there”, to use Gertrude Steins famous words in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). Although she was talking about Oakland, I think her words presciently apply to Los Angeles

It is important to recognize here that in art, architecture, and cities, the absence of meaning is itself a meaning as it supports an ideology, notwithstanding postmodernist protestations to the contrary. The piling up of images for its own sake without a redeeming content is a reflection of the obsessive feeding frenzy of late capitalism consumption, and has dire consequences for the planet and its inhabitants. Perhaps the 21st century the death of the real will be followed by the revenge of the real when the fabrication of images can no longer be sustained by the economic and ecological situation.

Endnotes

R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971).

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J. Derrida, *Positions* (A. Bass trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

W Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

F. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (J .W. Baskin trans.). (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

G. Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971).

Figures

All the figures are line drawings by Malka Helfman that are based on the works of art and architecture cited in the article.