

## Producers of contemporary art: X, Y, Z generations

**Ödül Işıtman\***, Department of Music and Fine Arts, Middle East Technical University, 06800, Cankaya, Ankara, Turkey.

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### Abstract

According to generational theory, individuals who share an era's conditions, social events, distresses, and similar faith and who have similar responsibilities tend to show similar behavioral patterns. The question that the present study initially addressed was "What is the correspondence of this theory's premises in the field of art with particular focus on contemporary art?" As the literature search proceeded, questions such as the following increased: *Can this theory's premises be the source of criticisms made in today's art?, Could it be that art, like society, is also planned (or manipulated)?*. Thus, the scopes that remain unanswered widened and the literature search was futile. It was deemed necessary to first outline an introductory general framework of the topic addressed. Accordingly, based on today's discourse, an attempt was made to understand the correspondence between generations and contemporary art. This research will serve as a base for future studies on this topic.

Keywords: contemporary art, generations X, Y, Z, multiculturalism, globalization.

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\*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Ödül Işıtman**, Department of Music and Fine Arts, Middle East Technical University, 06800, Cankaya, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail address: [odulisitman@gmail.com](mailto:odulisitman@gmail.com)

According to the generational theory (Howe & Strauss, 1992; Strauss & Howe, 1991), individuals who share an era's conditions, social events, distresses, and faith and who have responsibilities tend to show similar behavioral patterns. Since similar behavioral patterns are mostly formed during childhood and adolescence years, the time period of generations is two decades long. Generations are classified based on date of births and are defined in terms of various characteristics including austerity, competition, social sensitivity, anxiety, and technology familiarity (Howe & Strauss, 2000; 2007). Greatest (G) generation (born 1901-1924) and Silent generation (born 1925-1942) have witnessed the times of war, famine, and slaughter. Baby Boomer generations (born 1943-1960) were influential in post-war wealth and production and have replaced the extinct generation. Generation X (born 1961-1981) are the representatives of a more political and cautious mind that span the years of fearing nuclear war. It was these generations that shaped the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Generation Y (Millennial; born 1982-2005) are the digital natives. Those born during the years 2005-2025 belong to Generation Z (Homeland) (Howe & Strauss, 2007). The most important difference that distinguishes generation Z from the others is that they are the first generation whose characteristics are known long before they are born (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In 1990s, Howe and Strauss (2007) predicted the members of Generation Z as internet addicted, withdrawn to home, and alienated individuals. Generational theory has informed various fields including politics, economy, and communication. However, the study of generational theory with respect to art seems to be quite limited. The major ground for relating generational theory to art is *archetypes*. Howe and Strauss (2007) have identified four types of generational archetypes, namely, *prophet*, *nomad*, *hero*, and *artist*, to refer to generations with comparable age locations and sharing attitudes and values. According to the theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991; 2007), considering generational patterns relative to their similar attitudes toward family, culture and values, risk, and civic engagement allows us to predict the course of generations, i.e., how they will mature. Howe and Strauss (2007) explain *artist* generations as follows (p. 47):

*Artist* generations are born during a great war or other crisis, a time when worldly perils boil off the complexity of life, and public consensus, aggressive institutions, and personal sacrifice prevail. Artists grow up as overprotected children, come of age as the sensitive young adults of a post-crisis world, break free as indecisive midlife leaders during a spiritual awakening, and age into empathic post-awakening elders. Because of their location in history, such generations tend to be remembered for their quiet years of rising adulthood and their midlife years of flexible, consensus-building leadership. Their primary endowments relate to pluralism, expertise, and due process. An examination of history of art based on the above mentioned theoretical rationale reveals the following highlights: Marinetti (1876-1944), who entirely refused past and traditions and argued that the world was dependent on advancement based on science and technology, was a representative of the Missionary generation (1860-1882) which was characterized by the aim of spreading the guidance of mind. Like Marcel Proust (1871-1922) who wrote the 7 volume book "In Search of Lost Time" during the years 1913-1927 and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) who focused on the tension of the conflict between generations... Like their contemporaries who refused traditional style and theory, Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Freud (1856-1939) questioned the reality behind the visible while Kandinsky (1866-1944), Matisse (1869-1954), and Klee (1879-1940) explored abstraction. Valery (1871-1945), Rilke (1875-1926), Yeats (1865-1939), and Stevens (1879-1965) have radically changed symbol and image with their new poem metrics (Kumar, 1999). It was the Missionary generation who instilled in society the perception that modernisation is related to advancement. The representatives of the following generation, i.e., the Lost generation (1880-1900), on the other hand, have focused on the negative reflections of advancement on society. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) unsettled modernism with his available-objects so long as ago 1913 as he showed that everything can be work of art and that every activity can be art. In the same years, with constructivism, Naum Gabo (1890-1977) and Antoine Pevsner (1884-1962) emphasized in their works that sculpture is not something that is done only with carving. Musil (1880-1942), Woolf (1882-1941), Joyce (1882-1941), Kafka (1883-1924), Eliot (1888-1965), Faulkner (1897-1962), and Lawrence (1885-1930) geared towards expressing experiences in language and crisis emotion as they departed from reality and naturalism which they viewed as the invent of modernism (Kumar, 1999). Brecht (1898-1956) objected staging techniques, traditional topics, and standart acting (whole and completed character style). Berg (1885-1935) and Webern (1883-1945) moved in the direction of Schoenberg's (1874-1951) way that he started in the previous generation. They moved away from the traditional "tonality" principle of Classicism and Romanticism. Instead, Berg

and Webern embraced the “atonality” principle of the Second Viennese School and expressed inner emotions with the “dissonance” elements in their works. Fragmentation of figure and form was the aim of cubist movement that Picasso (1881-1973) and Braque (1882-1963) pioneered. Those, like Neo-Dada (1950), Happenings (1950-1960), Concrete poetry (1956), Situationism (1960), and Fluxus (1960-1970) who pondered around the peripheral of modernism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who focused on anti-system views (Stiles, 1996) are the representatives of the Greatest generation (1901-1924). The Frankfurt School thinkers, who argued with a critical approach that the better is outside of what already exists, are the representatives of the Greatest generation characterized by a good future and patriotism. Critical theory of Frankfurt School drew on an interdisciplinary combination of linguistics, semiotics, Marxism, feminism, anthropology, social history, psychoanalysis, and theoretical approaches of other disciplines. In this sense, Frankfurt School thinkers prepared the ground for postmodernism as they integrated post-structural philosophy and enlightenment critique (Stiles, 1996). Post-modern artists who viewed the world as a playground are the individuals of the Silent (1925-1942) and Baby Boomer (1945-1965) generations. At a time when political turmoil was rampant at the end of 1960s, conceptual art was formed with the mathematical orientations of Minimalism and Jasper Johns’s (b. 1930) philosophical ironies (Stiles, 1996) and its pioneering artists included Manzoni (1933-1963) and Yves Klein (1928-1962). They adopted lawlessness as a law and geared towards denying all kinds of firm discourse. The previous Missionary generation’s view of descriptiveness, standardization, and collectivism in modern art was in conflict with their views. They competed against this view by particularly emphasizing the multiple power of meaning in terms of distinctness and diversity. The metanarratives and ideologies of the “Missionary generation modernism” came to an end; it was the beginning of “Baby Boomer generation postmodernism” pioneered by the Silent generation. This period was marked by glorification of small narratives, personal stories, localities, new identities, differences, and privileges. Practices of actual art, built by the foundation laid by Fluxus and Conceptual Art after post-1960, have become established with young artists (amateurs) in 1990s. At this point, as art was being transformed into a world of everlasting “now” where origin and trends, past or present do not exist, representatives of the X and Y generations have become the producers of actual art. Actual Art, which begun to interact with global economic, political, and cultural networks in 2000s, focused on topics such as environment, feminism, multiculturalism, globalization, and technology-human relationship. Being in interaction with the consequences of globalization, actual art was now gripped by new forms of power. On the other hand, it tried to create its own resistance shield by founding art initiatives. As internet technologies became the control and surveillance tools of global capitalism, artists started to explore ways of using internet as a platform for freedom and originality. With the motto *Contemporary<sup>1</sup> art is dead, long live the Contemporary art*, actual artists were detached from their contemporaries (20<sup>th</sup> century), gearing towards the digital narratives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a narrative that can reverse the system with its own gun. Though it was the Generations X and Y who have been the producers of 21<sup>th</sup> century contemporary art since 2000s, it will be Generation Z and its contemporaries who will shape the art of this century.



Figure 3.

Baby Boomer Generation (1943-1960)

(left to right)

a. Joseph Kosuth, (1945)

Mondrian's Work III, 2015,  
Installations, Silkscreen on glass,  
white neon mounted directly to  
the wall,  
100 x 100 cm.

b. Ron Mueck, (1958)

Boy, 1999,

Hyper-realism,  
490 x 490 x 240 cm

Despite this attempt to relate art to generations by making parallels between knowledge and dates, it has not been possible to make a sound evaluation based on behaviors and perceptions.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the word *contemporary* is operationalized as encompassing a century-long period and every kind of value used to define this period

Such evaluation would only be possible by analyzing each artist and each work of art one by one in line with the theory. There still remains uncertainty regarding how generational theory, a far-reaching theory whose impact on societies can be observed and/or has been proved, can be related to art. In fact, research bearing on generations started with August Comte during the years 1830-1840. Generational research further gained prominence in 1920s with the work of Karl Mannheim known for his views on the necessity of planning in modern society (Mannheim, 1998). Douglas McGregor, one of the pioneering researchers in management science, investigated individuals with regard to management science between the years 1930 and 1950. McGregor (1957) has claimed that creative human energy that emerges in favorable conditions can be of significant use for organizational purposes. He has proposed two theories for employees, namely "Theory of X" and "Theory of Y", positing that some individuals can be observed as reflecting the first theory and some as reflecting the second theory (McGregor, 1957). Since both theories are right and also wrong, the debate on Theory X and Theory Y are still on-going. According to Ronald Inglehart (1989), the key to management is to find which categories individuals belong to and their motivation sources. Individuals with materialistic values attach importance to trust, stable economy, strong defense force, and economic wealth whereas post-materialistic individuals prioritize in their lives factors indicative of life quality such as freedom of thought, environmental awareness, and self-actualization (Inglehart, 1989). Although Inglehart redefined generations in terms of their reflection in industrial societies, it was William Strauss and Neil Howe who gave the generational theory its name. These two researchers have shared their work with their published books (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 1992; 1993; 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991); they analyzed generations based on their predictions till 2069, outlined the boundaries of the theory, and suggested the internal typologies of generations that are incompatible with each other.

It has been proven that the influence of the first twenty years continues for a minimum of 60 years. The reason for this prolonged influence is that those who are born in the same generation move on to active life during the time period of the other generation. The "reverse" reading of the prolonged influence on generations then will be as follows: Individuals can be influenced in the first twenty years for the targeted common behaviors. This means that planning can be made in line with the goals of different forms of power. Thus, with the right predictions for a generation, the next 60 years can be planned as well as manipulated... According to Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) who argued in the 1960s that advertising is at the core of this planning, with advertisements of cultural and artistic products produced for profit making purpose, individuals are infused with a lifestyle and worldview, thus, are conditioned. Marcuse and other Frankfurt school theorists negate this situation by noting that such method helps to create similar lifestyles among different social classes, thereby forming unidimensional thoughts and behaviors (Marcuse, 2010). In fact, this negation manifests itself today in the dedifferentiation of expectations observed among individuals from different cultures. If it was advertising that rendered possible dedifferentiation concerning goals of power forms in 1950s, it was globalization in 1980s, internet in 1990s, social media and computer games in 2000s.



Figure 4.

X Generation (1961-1981)  
(left to right)

a. Damien Hirst (1965),  
For the Love of God,  
2007, real human  
tooth, platine, diamond,  
17 x 13 x 19 cm.

b. David Cerny (1967),  
Pink Tank 1991,  
Prague, Mixed Media.

In this case, the question arises as to where art is/will be within this planning in the context of freedom and originality. Is it possible that this system which can foresee the identity of individuals of future has also planned, or can plan, the audience, curator, critic, historian, and even the artist? Or can it manipulate them? Adorno (1903-1969) argues that art is the only field that can produce reality, truth, and hope within future utopia. While acknowledging the fact that society influences individual and vice versa, Adorno states that art can only continue its existence to the extent that it negates the society it has emanated from. Artist is not an individual independent of society; still, artist has neither been an individual that acts together with society. Foucault (2005) (b. 1926) defines reconstruction of self as stereotyping of individuals based on a particular public system shaped by values of the generational theory. He further defines this new postmodern power form, in an accepting way, as a positive power that is productive and oriented towards supporting life and increasing strength that life provides. As with the modern era, new power forms and academic disciplines emerge and they answer the lifestyle of individuals within the daily practices, instead of external ones, and thus create "identity". Power does not need violence to surround the individual; instead, new fine techniques that spread over the social whole have been developed. This case that Foucault considers as reconstruction of self is both the reason and result of cultural industry (Adorno, 2007). Adorno argues that cultural industry adapts consumers to itself as it integrates the old and the familiar in a new quality. In this way, low- and high-cost products are aggregated though this aggregation is disadvantageous to both. While the fundamental values of artistic ability are transferred to other production areas, profile of a commercially successful artist who embodies a concentrated version of the required qualifications is created to serve as a model for labor markets other than art. Today, research shows that generations in nearly all cultures want to earn a lot of money as far in advance as possible, attributing primary responsibility to "creativity". As creativity transforms into ideology, a portrayal of artist as commercially successful is depicted and artist becomes a guiding model. According to Chin-Tao Wu (2014), the methods enabling this have begun with the increasing art collecting activities of the companies at the two shores of Atlantic starting from 1980s. Today's companies equipped with their own curators and art departments have used their economic power and exhibited their collections at home and abroad. They started engaging in intensive competition with public museums and galleries in terms of privilege and authority. Wu thinks that this competition is transforming art museums and galleries into advertisement mediums. These companies that determine the art market has taken over the function of cultural institutions in societies and benefit from their social status (Wu, 2014). Isabella Graw (2010) agrees with Wu on marketization of art and further points out the role of auctions in this process. She views auctions as directly proving that they are a realm of gaining a lot of money and cultural reputation. Still, Graw (2010) considers information market (museums and various disciplines of history of art, cultural studies, aesthetics, etc.) as important for its role in justifying and favoring the interest in young artists with established networks. All in all, the current status of art seems to support what Lyotard (1924-1998) has pointed out, that art should be left to amateurs (Zeytinoglu, 2016).

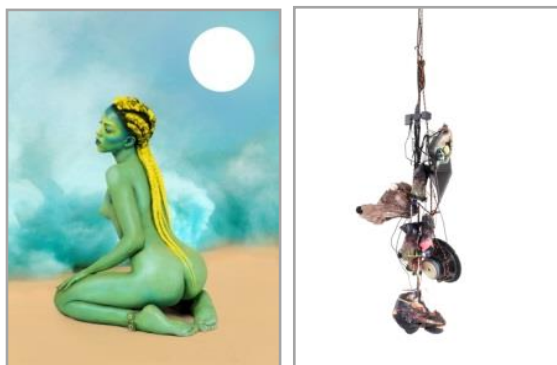


Figure 5.

Y Generation (1982-2005)  
(left to right)

- a. Juliana Huxtable (1987), *Untitled in the Rage*, 2015  
(Nibiru Cataclysm), Inkjet print, 101 x 76 cm
- b. Kevin Beasley, (1985), *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* 2015,  
Mixed media, dimensions variable

With the motto *Contemporary art is dead, long live the Contemporary art*, today's art is evolving towards a quite different understanding of art, one that can reverse, with its own gun, the system in the new digital era. During this evolution, today's art is changing all the values known in the name of art. However, it still remains uncertain as to whether this change is evolving with the goals of power forms that act upon the premises of the theory or with the own dynamics of art. As art is,

in a timeless and placeless language, pushing to the limits of perception, the answers are sought to the questions raised in nearly all the areas of reality and virtuality.

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