

## FROM SOUVENIR TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT: POSTSECRET, ART, AND POLITICS

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Initiated by American artist Frank Warren, PostSecret is a contemporary art project that has turned into a cross-cultural phenomenon. What was once a local Washington, DC, event is now an exhibition touring in art galleries across North America that has been published in four collections (*PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*, *My Secret: A PostSecret Book*, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A PostSecret Book*, and *A Lifetime of Secrets: A PostSecret Book*) and published weekly on Blogspot.

Warren's PostSecret is a collection of postcards inscribed with secrets submitted by anonymous contributors. In this exhibit, ordinary individuals are given the opportunity to be artists who communicate their deepest, darkest secrets to an unknown audience. From the trivial to the profound, secrets become public acts of display.

Using a cultural studies approach, we intend to deconstruct "the popular" that is PostSecret employing Stuart Hall's notion of the dialectic of cultural struggle. How does PostSecret illustrate his idea of the "double movement" of containment and resistance vis-à-vis hegemonic culture? We argue that PostSecret both resists and reproduces dominant discourses and practices in writing, art, and culture by attempting to reconcile binary divisions within the content that reproduce fragmentation established by form. We explore this notion by examining PostSecret as a communication phenomenon that encompasses issues of authorship and audience, anxieties about high and low culture, and the implications of using a basic communicative medium like the postcard.

We are interested in the prospect for empowerment and social change embedded in an exhibition that encourages victim narratives. However, there are concerns with the limitations inherent in PostSecret's mainstream commercialization, which constructs it as entertainment. Potential for major social transformation is curtailed by an exhibition that fails to engage with or address the larger sociological problems (homophobia, sexism, racism) that cultivate these secrets in the first place. This is partly due to an exhibition that locates both social problems and solutions in fragmented confessional texts.

### **Witnesses and Voyeurs: PostSecret's Artists and Audiences**

Because PostSecret is an exhibition that the public visits to view the fragmented visual narratives of complete strangers, one might wonder if the rhetorical act of viewership transforms audiences into voyeurs who have come to see the spectacle. Diana George and Diane Shoos explore the power dynamics of audience position in their article "Deflecting the Political in the Visual Images of Execution and the Death Penalty Debate" and discuss the binaries of "witnessing" and "voyeurism" in response to visual texts. Witnessing, as defined by George and Shoos, is "the act of seeing as evidence or proof that an event has occurred," and can be thought of as "an inherently political act that brings an event to the public for scrutiny" (590). Voyeurism, in contrast, induces

a politically detached reading of an image or text wherein the viewer obtains “gratification or pleasure of some sort.” We agree that voyeurism ultimately results in a shift of power “from the person or event being seen to the observer of that event,” as the voyeur merely satisfies her or his morbid curiosities. This differs from the power position of the witness, who feels compelled to act based on her or his spectatorship.

We argue that PostSecret locates the viewer in a postmodern “and/both” position of witness and voyeur—and that these disparate readings indicate the double movement of containment and resistance as discussed by Hall. Applying the notions of voyeurism and witnessing as a template, we will now explore the politics of seeing in more detail. Stuart Hall’s notion of containment and resistance mirrors the ways in which people of different social groups might interpret PostSecret as a text. Some may dissociate themselves from the collection entirely, while others may find solace in the postcards. Members of the viewing audience experience a sense of either unity or apathy toward another person’s story, incorporating their experiences into the exhibit’s confessional framework. In addition, some individuals embody both perspectives in turn as they walk through the exhibit, reading the myriad of secrets arranged on the gallery walls. Thus, the resulting perceptions depend largely on the underpinnings of an audience member’s cultural ideologies or beliefs about social distance and viewership. The voyeuristic reading deflects the political connotations associated with PostSecret. Like a traveling freak show, PostSecret charges admission to view a spectacle, one that—through a series of brief narratives involving adultery, murder, and revenge—emphasizes difference and triggers disassociation between the confessors and the audience members. To voyeurs, the muted voices concealed within the narratives seem “abnormal” and “bizarre” in comparison to their own.

The complicated and rhetorical appeal of this exhibit is the anonymity of the artists. This anonymity prevents audience intervention. Those who send urgent secrets speak to nobody in particular, meaning that neither Warren nor the audience is empowered to help, and accountability is forsaken. Cultural norms maintain the division between the public and the private (a distance invoked further by the position of witness/voyeur). The process of reading a secret as opposed to being the recipient of one privately divulged reinforces the audiences’ simultaneous position as witnesses and voyeurs of this spectacle. Anonymity also becomes problematic in that the lack of intervention leaves both the artists and audience disengaged from collective action.

The social distance that comes with anonymity can make a politicized reading difficult. Members of the viewing public may only be able to envision the abstract issue, perceiving political and social perils as unsolvable problems either too large to bear or simply not worth their time. On the contrary, PostSecret can inspire a socially conscious and empowered reading—that of witnessing.

It could be argued that all viewers, to some extent at least, bear witness to the secrets of others displayed in the exhibit; however, there comes a point at which merely seeing becomes something more. The witnesses, moved by the pathos encoded in the confessions, feel compelled to act, to take the information they have been given or directed to and do something tangible with it. Suicide awareness, for instance, is promoted within the contextual frame of the exhibit.

Warren performs a central role; as witness, he interprets and extrapolates the meaning of the exhibit. Although his influence in the selection process, gallery arrangement, and artistic edifice promotes a proactive reading that encourages social justice and institutional change, the exhibit’s

message is open to multiple interpretations. Meaning is not fixed. Ultimately, the viewing audiences decide how to interpret the exhibit and how to situate themselves in relation to the art.

### **High and Low Culture: Changing the Nature of the Artist/Audience Relationship**

While we believe that spectatorship of PostSecret situates readers in a specific position of power, we also believe that PostSecret shifts existing hierarchies of power between artists and audiences—the encoders and decoders—by fusing the two. The traditional relationship between artist and audience encompasses the power struggle within the art world, using the binary of high and low art to juxtapose both works of art and audiences. High art, or the aesthetic perspective, is associated with beauty, expression, creativity, genius, individuality, mastery, and form, to name a few. Art and its producer, the artist, are seen as somehow more important than the audience (Shain 166). Audience engagement and interaction are thus considered irrelevant.

This framework also constructs high art as esoteric. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted that esoteric works “contain [a] complex structure [that] continually implies tacit reference to the entire history of previous structures, and is accessible only to those who possess practical or theoretical mastery of a refined code, of successive codes, and of the code of these codes,” suggesting that these texts are constructed for a particular audience (120). In other words, high art is esoteric because both its producers and its consumers must have a specialized understanding of the art form to be deemed worthy of creation and spectatorship. Consequently, the artist justifies his or her position above the audience. From this standpoint, audience interpretation is irrelevant because the art is seen as containing one essential meaning or secret. “Artist” signifies genius, reifying authority, while the audience is left to interpret the masterpiece. As high art, PostSecret fulfills some of these requirements: ordinary people, the marginalized creators of the postcards, are granted legitimacy and a voice in a gallery as artists. The anonymity of the artists inspires an esoteric reading, as the audience must learn about the context of the exhibit before being truly able to engage with the texts. The construction of the author as knowing is also reinforced through the process of viewer-ship because the audience imports its understanding of artistic codes and conventions to interpret the meanings embedded in the postcards. Viewing these postcards-turned-artistic-canvases becomes a cultural event, transforming confessors into unlikely artists.

Low culture, on the other hand, privileges the inverse relationship: Shain notes that in this dynamic, “the judgment of the receiver [is] higher than that of the artist/producer” (168), privileging audiences over artists and readers over authors. Entertainment, not contemplation, becomes the directive of the work. Consumption is valued over creativity, and content is privileged over form. In other words, the visceral reaction by the audience takes precedence over the art itself. In PostSecret, while the exhibition features mainly postcards, the rhetorical situation of reading private confessions leaves the audience more interested in the content than the form. The anonymity of the contributors precludes them from providing possible interpretations or contextual information, effectively privileging the interpretation of the audience. Furthermore, the “I” voice embedded in these narratives encourages audiences to internalize and adopt these secrets as their own. While Frank Warren takes on the role of curator (and collaborator), he is most certainly not the creator/producer/encoder of the messages and the artwork. The success and artistic merit of PostSecret depend very much on an audience that browses the website, buys the books, and visits the traveling exhibit.

So what do we make of an art exhibit like PostSecret that simultaneously privileges the posi-

tions of artist and audience? PostSecret empowers us to create spaces for a more equitable relationship between the two. Through its fusion of high and low art, PostSecret enables the producers of these postcards to become artists who are granted legitimacy through common experiences. Consequently, the audience members, the elites and masses alike, become art connoisseurs who are legitimized through their emotional reactions. PostSecret becomes an art exhibit because it elicits empathy, humor, and shock. In other words, the meaning and value of the exhibit depend just as much on the audience as they do on the artist (Shain 175). Of course, Frank Warren also plays a role in this relationship by establishing himself not only as collector of secrets and curator but also as collaborator and artist. In this position, Warren grants himself agency, selecting which postcards will be included in the exhibit, website, and books, enlarging some postcards and shrinking others. His selections, arrangements, and interpretations of these images form the basis for their housing in an elite space. The ultimate effect of this collaboration is that hierarchies between high/low culture and artist/audience are deconstructed—at least temporarily.

### **Avant-Garding Kitsch Culture**

Besides dismantling the hierarchies embedded within the class-based politics of art, PostSecret achieves another form of artistic hybridity by attempting to reconcile kitsch and avant-garde culture. Described extensively by Clement Greenberg in his essay “The Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” kitsch is linked to low culture in that kitsch is “the culture of the masses” (122). Imitating the effects of art, kitsch is banal, perhaps even “tacky” art (116). The postcard itself is an excellent example of kitsch: created by tourism as a souvenir of another cultural space, it is inexpensive, mass-produced, and disposable, signifying the same “tackiness” as a shirt that proclaims “Somebody in Texas Loves Me.” Accompanied by its own textual conventions, the postcard is addressed to a close friend or family member and contains a predictable message such as “Wish you were here”. As vacation souvenirs, postcards often contain “kitschy” art; a postcard from Las Vegas may contain an image of an Elvis impersonator, while one from Florida may contain stereotypical images of flamingos and oranges.

Avant-garde artwork, on the other hand, is defined as oppositional and alternative because its imitation of art encourages us to rethink concepts of aesthetic value and politics (Shain 175). Britta B. Wheeler asserts that the “tradition of the avant-garde promotes social justice through art which often uses provocative and direct modes of representation to enact difficult subject matter and call attention to social problems,” constructing a sociopolitical dimension to avant-garde art (155). In other words, produced by people on the periphery of society, avant-garde art is an aesthetic labor that indicts oppressive social structures. Art is not just art, but is also a form of unspoken social critique (157). Contemporary examples of the avant-garde include London’s anti-capitalist early punk music and certain forms of graffiti, particularly protest graffiti. By assembling visual narratives that privilege marginalized identities, PostSecret takes cues from avant-garde art. The audience temporarily forgets the form—the postcard—and instead focuses on the content—what these narratives have to say.

In describing PostSecret as a mix of the avant-garde and the kitsch, we might appropriate Stuart Hall’s conception of hybridity; in this sense PostSecret is an art form that “seek[s] to detach a cultural form from its implantation in one tradition, and to give it a new cultural resonance or accent,” suggesting that artistic hybridity brings new meaning to this form (485). The avant-garde nature of this exhibit elicits not only emotional response but also action: confronting inner demons

such as self-loathing, guilt, and grief has prompted an activist response, particularly help lines for the suicidal. Individuals not only submit postcards but continue this do-it-yourself ethos by compiling clips as YouTube videos and creating art exhibitions in online spaces. By making a connection between art and life, the avant-garde nature of PostSecret fuses itself with the kitschiness of the postcard to create art that moves and potentially inspires action.

### **Postmodern Art and the Preservation of Artistic Hegemony**

As scholars, we wonder whether these shifts and bridges are enough. We believe that PostSecret ultimately limits the potential for cultural metamorphosis, both artistically and politically. Its postmodernity represents the “double movement” of containment and resistance, challenging structures only at surface level. Theorist Fredric Jameson’s work on postmodernity helps us better understand these issues: for the audience, PostSecret demonstrates that there is no “universal” experience of suffering. The narrative written by the individual who was raped as a child moves the audience just as much as the narrative of a survivor asking a deceased loved one about his or her pain. At the same time, these experiences are entirely different from one another. The “secrets” revealed on these postcards are also fragmented: “Who was the rapist?” we might ask of the first, or “What did he or she suffer from?” we might ask of the latter. How is the audience really supposed to identify with and be moved to action by single confessions or utterances, even if they are compiled in an art gallery? Where are the connections between the cards? They cannot be seen because they are visually and metaphorically separated by the borders imposed by the form—the postcard. As a reading audience, our expectations of postcards are that they ought to be brief and lighthearted, something quickly produced and consumed. This makes it difficult for audiences to be moved to action by the postcards in this exhibit.

As rhetors, we must also consider motives for this highly stylized and visual practice of composition: while PostSecret began as a community art project, is the medium the art, or are the narrative confessions the visual masterpieces? Perhaps the artistic form simply facilitates the desire to confess secrets in writing. What is interesting is that although the practice of textual confession is not new—we have written secrets in diaries, journals, letters (even put messages in bottles)—the format is. Instead of communicating a secret—a personal truth—to someone in a letter or to oneself in a diary, writers now communicate in a new textual space by addressing, simultaneously, someone and no one, while also writing for and perhaps to oneself. This process could mark a new feature of writing in a postmodern age, a process in which we acknowledge that we write for multiple, fragmented audiences, spread across temporal and geographic spaces.

While PostSecret is innovative in the sense that it changes the process of writing for an anonymous and disconnected audience, there are issues with the transcribing of secrets. One complication associated with the postmodernity of PostSecret is its lack of depth. While some may read a certain complexity in the exhibit’s communication of human emotions, the artwork does so in a simplistic and limited way that may not make a connection between text and image in the message. The same postmodern ethos that enriches the writing and reading experience of artists and audiences also presents obstacles for social transformation through art. Jameson argues that modern art “expressed the art object as something mysterious within which there was a secret to be uncovered, a truth to reveal, or a history to uncover” (*Postmodernism* 6). In other words, the message and meaning of the work were not explicit or guaranteed but constructed by the artist and deciphered

by the audience through his or her work. Jameson gives an example of van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*, which symbolically re-creates the circumstances of his subject (Clarke).

This type of art aligns itself with our contemporary conceptions of meaning, where meaning is constructed in the interaction between producer and receiver. We believe that the structure of PostSecret precludes the possibility of meaning-making by the audience alone because secrets are not embedded within the art but are part of the artwork. Matching the simple aesthetic design of the postcard, complex secrets, feelings, and thoughts are brandished across the surface, negating the role of audience as constructor of meaning by asserting: "This is my secret." The only real secrets of the exhibit are the identities of the artists, which are subsumed under the secrets they possess. Identity does not matter. Indeed, we see a reinforcement of art hierarchies between artists and audiences when Clarke describes postmodern art as "not only the absence of meaning as spoken through the work but a rejection of the viewer. It is a product that does not allow for the participation of an audience (through its presentation of stagnant and lifeless objects) and leaves the displaced subject numb." Unlike the dynamic energy of performance art or dance, PostSecret presents disembodied and silenced voices—artistic content—neatly contained within the boundaries imposed by the postcard form.

The juxtaposed, pastiche effect of PostSecret also reinforces the hegemony embedded in art discourses. Postmodern pastiche, described rhetorically as bricolage and juxtaposition, involves the fusion of different elements in works of art. Also described as eclecticism, pastiche uses repetition to deconstruct the notion of an original. We see elements of this in postcards that are assembled using various media and materials. Images are cut, fragmented, pasted, layered, juxtaposed. The exhibition itself functions as a form of pastiche, organizing and arranging uniform pieces of art (postcards) in a layered and repetitive way. As viewers, we accept this highly organized arrangement of multiple rectangular-shaped, postage-sized pieces as stylized art. In his work *Signatures of the Visible*, Jameson describes pastiche as the moment when "energetic artists who now lack both forms and content cannibalize the museum and wear the masks of extinct mannerisms" (83). Based on this interpretation of pastiche, we infer that PostSecret encourages the creation and legitimacy of artworks that deconstruct the elite status of high art, assuming that such a thing has ever existed and continues to do so. Another consequence of postmodern pastiche is that it compromises the individuality of the handcrafted postcards, because Warren leaves the artists anonymous and arranges their narratives according to his own conventions. While each postcard is individual, in that it has been individually constructed, it nevertheless is subsumed under the homogenous category of the "PostSecret exhibit."

### **No Return Address: The Challenges of Anonymity**

Before PostSecret is announced as the democratization or deconstruction of elitist art discourse, we must consider the impact and effects it has on the art world, especially given the absence of the artist. Although anonymity does not preclude the possibility of individual liberation (as it can encourage individual disclosure as a therapeutic narrative for both artists and audience), it is problematic because it encourages a homogenization of fragmented identities within PostSecret. Because works of art cannot be classified according to the identities of the artists, they are subsumed under "niche" categories. Persons A and B may have nothing in common except for the fact that both send in postcard narratives describing abuse, for instance. There is form and content but a content without context. Without context the audience cannot fully understand these situations:



what structural reasons could have accounted for this abuse? Racism, poverty, sexism? When looking at rape narratives in the postcards, the viewers are so distracted with the shock of also reading the postcards as incest narratives that they might not see rape and incest as thematic social problems. These narratives are framed as personal problems, not social narratives. Readers may after all so be moved by the pathos of the exhibit that they may not take into account the larger social issues that would inspire attention toward matters of violence against women, for example. Rather than preserve the individuality and uniqueness of handcrafted postcards, PostSecret fosters an ethos of a universal human experience by arranging postcards thematically, preventing a successful politics of difference.

PostSecret may, however, inspire individual action by drawing attention to significant social problems such as suicide. The PostSecret website, for example, features a link to Hopeline, the website for 1-800-SUICIDE, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. PostSecret is credited with saving Hopeline when it lost its federal funding in January 2005. During this period, Warren sent out a plea to his website visitors to make donations to save this service and raised \$30,000 within the first week. When the pop band All-American Rejects requested to use Warren's postcards in their music video *Dirty Little Secret*, Warren collected no royalties, asking the band to donate \$2,000 to Hopeline instead. These real-life examples demonstrate the power of PostSecret to raise awareness; however, we are more interested in the degree to which PostSecret interrogates larger social inequities that lead to suicidal thoughts in the first place.

We question whether or not PostSecret provides an open forum for silenced voices. With many of these victim narratives describing abuse and discrimination, the anonymity of the contributors/victims also has a corollary function of protecting the identity of the perpetrators or institutions responsible. The silence encoded in written discourse is also telling: by encouraging the submission of unspoken secrets, anonymity may reinforce suppression, exhibiting disembodied, silent confessions. Borders are therefore not resisted but contained within the postcard, establishing social distance between the contributors and the audiences. If progressive art functions to encourage dialogue between different groups, this is missing in PostSecret; the disembodied artists are never given the opportunity to engage in critical discussions about their work.

Therefore, without identity, political transformation through art becomes difficult. Consider other social justice movements such as civil rights, feminism, and LGBT, which required politicized identities to confront racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Enabling political mobilization of PostSecret's contributors is incredibly difficult to achieve if we know nothing about their physical locales or identities. While the audience can read their confessions, anonymity ensures that the solution lives in the contributors alone, precluding the movement for accountability and social responsibility. Anonymity shifts power away from audiences, reducing them to passive observers or voyeurs. The potential for the political in the personal is disengaged.

### **Selling Out: PostSecret, Co-optation, and Commodification**

Another indication of the limits of PostSecret is its co-optation and commodification by mainstream media. This is not limited only to the exhibition. Distributed in four books, promoted in lectures featuring Frank Warren, made the star of the All-American Rejects' music video, and circulated online, PostSecret has become a part of popular culture.

Although funds have been raised for ventures like suicide hotlines, the commercial success of this exhibit invites us to question its transgressive potential. Shain notes that ultimately, the com-

mercialization and political goals of art are incompatible (185). If art, particularly political art, “is said to question, critique, challenge, negate, subvert, undermine, unmask, undo, transgress, interrupt, overturn, dismantle, problematize, resist, exceed, or disrupt” (181), how can PostSecret effectively do so through capitalist co-optation? In forms of “low art,” the absence of commercialization tends to match political action, making us wonder if PostSecret had more potential as a “community art project” and underground movement than as a full-fledged art exhibit and collection of books (185).

In *An Essay on Liberation*, Herbert Marcuse explores the artistic and political limits of co-optation: “the eruption of anti-art (modern art) has manifested itself in many familiar forms. . . . And yet, this entire de-formation is Form: anti-art has remained art, supplied, purchased and contemplated as art” (41–42). So, too, the consumption that begins and ends with PostSecret: contributors transform ordinary postcards into pieces that are repackaged and sold back to the public as art. Clarke interprets commodified art through the lens of Jameson, who agreed that the political potential of modernity was circumvented “because its reactionary push was defined and sustained by commodity reification.” Mass production reproduces that “double bind” or “double movement” by creating necessary social interest and attention that is transformed into consumption, emphasizing objects that are “bought” as opposed to action that must be “done.” We suggest that although PostSecret helps individuals, this exhibition lacks the necessary means for major sociopolitical mobility and transformation. Shain asks us, “[I]s there a difference between a questioning and a challenge? Between a subversion and an unmasking? Between a dismantling and a critique?” (181). Perhaps PostSecret exemplifies the answer through its simultaneous mode of containment and resistance, paving the path but not venturing onto it.

### **Conclusion: Insufficient Postage for Artistic/Political Transformation**

While PostSecret brings the promise of artistic and political change, its techniques of anonymity are what prevent it from fulfilling those larger goals. By deconstructing hierarchies and building bridges embedded in the discourses of art, PostSecret carves out spaces for “the people” to express a voice in elite aesthetic spaces. These voices are the product of the guilt imposed upon artists by social edicts that transform victims into sinners and promise redemption through disclosure. The culture of secrecy ironically pressures people to divulge secrets and is organized around the assumption that revelation is liberation. But anonymity is a double-edged sword: while it protects individuals from public scrutiny, it effectively precludes public action since audiences cannot intervene on behalf of the anonymous artists. Likewise, the audience occupies a space that vacillates between concerned witnessing and perverse voyeurism, sometimes existing in a “both/and” space. Through its convergence of high and low cultural forms, PostSecret unintentionally reaffirms hierarchies and participates in commercial co-optation that ultimately fails to challenge and subvert oppressive social structures. It is not that PostSecret does not attempt; it is simply that its efforts do not match its goals. Illustrating the classic “double bind” in art as social movement and the “double movement” of containment and resistance found in popular culture, PostSecret is best understood as a cultural trend as opposed to an artistic and political revolution.

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