

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 6 *Volume 6 (2008)*

Article 4

2008

A Third System of the Arts? An Exploration of Some Ideas from Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*

David Clowney
clowney@rowan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clowney, David (2008) "A Third System of the Arts? An Exploration of Some Ideas from Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 6 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol6/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

A Third System of the Arts? An Exploration of Some Ideas from Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*

David Clowney

Abstract

I explore some implications of Larry Shiner's view that fine art is a modern invention. In part I, I briefly summarize Shiner's main thesis and defend it against some misunderstandings and objections that have appeared in the literature. In part II, I discuss Shiner's remarks about the possible emergence of what he calls a "third system of the arts." I ask what such a system might look like, consider some signs that it may indeed be emerging, and venture a suggestion about what would be required for it actually to come about.

Key Words

art divided, Art in its Time, craft, fine art, The Invention of Art, Mattick, modern system, Shiner, third system

1. Larry Shiner's "Art Divided" Thesis

In *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (cited hereafter as *TIA*), Larry Shiner claims that Art with a capital A, Fine Art, was invented in the west in the eighteenth century. [1] The claim is not original with him; he credits Paul Oskar Kristeller's essay "The Modern System of the Arts" [2] as the inspiration for his work. Others have made this claim as well, among them Pierre Bourdieu, [3] Paul Mattick, [4] and Terry Eagleton. [5] What Shiner has added is a detailed proof of the Kristeller claim using the methods of intellectual, social, cultural, and art history.

In brief, the thesis is this: There was a traditional "system of the arts" in the West before the eighteenth century. (Other traditional cultures still have a similar system.) In that system, an artist or artisan was a skilled maker or practitioner, a work of art was the useful product of skilled work, and the appreciation of the arts was integrally connected with their role in the rest of life. "Art," in other words, meant approximately the same thing as the Greek word *techne*, or in English "skill", a sense that has survived in phrases like "the art of war," "the art of love," and "the art of medicine." The usefulness of an art and its products was not limited to the merely utilitarian or decorative (*e.g.*, cooking, clothing, shelter, personal adornment, or warfare), but also included religious worship, cultural instruction and celebration, memorializing rulers, marking rites of passage, entertainment, and many other functions that linked it with intellectual and cultural life. Artisans were often honored in this older system, depending on the nature of their craft (painting ranked higher than the writing of plays), and they were certainly able to express themselves individually and make profound statements through their work, as Michelangelo and Shakespeare did. Nevertheless they practiced a craft, and self-expression was limited to the bounds set by their accountability to their patrons or employers, or in Shakespeare's case, by what the theater audience would pay to see (*TIA*, pp. 47-52).

Thus, in the old system, what we call the crafts (*e.g.*, weaving, stonemasonry, ceramics) were more highly honored and were taken more seriously than now, and what we call the arts (theater, painting, musical composition and performance, dance, etc.) were treated more like crafts than they are now. Modern ideas of art had not yet developed. Beauty, in the traditional system, was both highly prized and so strongly connected with utility that Aquinas thought an artifact could not be beautiful if unsuited to its ordinary use. He gives the outlandish example of a glass saw which, he says, could not be beautiful because it would be

useless (*Summa Theologica* I-II, 57, 3c, cited in *TIA*, p. 34). Naturally Aquinas never imagined work like that of contemporary glass artist Rick Beck, who has made his reputation with enormous, useless and (to my eye) often quite beautiful cast glass saws, screwdrivers, nuts, bolts and the like. Beck's work is an excellent example of the kind of thing that could never have existed under the traditional system of the arts. To see some of Beck's work, follow this link:

www.kentuckyarts.org/Vessels%202003/Rick%20Beck%20Exhibition.htm

What Shiner calls the modern system of the arts came together in the eighteenth century partly in connection with the development of a market for art among the growing middle class. In the new system, Fine Art (art with a capital "A") was divided from the crafts as the appropriate object of refined taste, and usefulness became rather a negative than a positive feature for a work of art. Art for Art's sake, the Artist as Visionary Genius, and the unique Aesthetic Attitude/Experience emerged as the distinguishing features of Fine Art. New institutions devoted to the arts, such as galleries, museums, concert halls and libraries, were a central part of the new system. The public had to learn that these were places where one must be quiet and devote one's sole attention to the work. (*TIA pp. 143-144*) Within the new system, Art was exalted, acquiring almost a religious significance by the nineteenth century, while craftwork was devalued and minimized, leaving room for the eventual emergence in the twentieth century of artists in whose work craft skills play no important role. Alexander Baumgarten gave the new category of "the aesthetic" its name in 1738. Kant and Schiller firmed up the philosophical definition of the aesthetic at the end of the eighteenth century, Kant famously isolating aesthetic judgment from other sorts of appreciation of a work or a landscape, and likewise providing an enduring analysis of the eighteenth century categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime. Shiner provides a fine review of this crucial passage in his chapter, "From Taste to the Aesthetic." (*TIA 130 – 151*)

In developing and expanding on Kristeller's thesis, Shiner has chosen to preserve that author's reference to a "system of the arts." The language may bother some readers. By "system" neither Kristeller nor Shiner means anything as tight or rigorous as many philosophers have meant by the word; rather the usage is analogous to that in the term "social system". The intent is to indicate the breadth and complexity of the arts in society, in relation to the rest of social life and culture. [6]

The modern system has some awkwardnesses and some internal contradictions. In it all Art is assumed to be of a kind, even though in the traditional system there would be no compelling reason to suppose that the disparate activities of music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and poetry (the five original "fine arts) share a common essence, in contrast with occasional overlaps in respect to form, narrative, imitation, beauty, etc. Arguably this assumption has directed the development of these arts (and of the others that have since been added to the group) in new ways, as well as setting possibly unsolvable challenges to aestheticians who are trying to define that common essence. Internal contradictions arise most generally in regard to the relation of the arts to the rest of life, now that the modern system has forced a partial separation between the two. For example, while often claiming universal human relevance and a transcendent mission, contemporary Fine Art in the modern period has become increasingly inaccessible to most people, for whom the role claimed by art is often filled by what Clement Greenberg disparagingly called Kitsch, or by a somewhat nostalgic attachment to classic works by early moderns like Van Gogh, Cézanne and Monet that were radical more than a century ago but now feel

comfortable.

In spite of such shortcomings, says Shiner, the modern system of the arts has remained both powerful and totalizing. Its standards and ideals have so taken hold of our understanding that we see the arts of the past and of other cultures through its lenses, and cannot make quick sense of the claim that it was invented in the eighteenth century. So it is not surprising that practitioners of the exiled popular arts and the crafts (furniture makers, potters, popular musicians, movie-makers, graphic novelists, video-game designers, gourmet chefs, hairdressers, and many more) regularly try to climb over the wall and be acknowledged as Artists. It's the only way to be taken seriously. The system responds by stretching the wall to assimilate a few of them who are deemed to have risen to the level of fine art (*e.g.*, Elsa Schiaparelli from among fashion designers, as reaffirmed recently by a 2003 show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), leaving the rest outside.

There has always been a resistance to the strictures of the modern system, often focusing on the charge that it separates art from life, and sometimes attempting to destroy the split between Art and the crafts (*e.g.* William Morris, the Bauhaus). Shiner thinks that this resistance is becoming stronger, and that the assimilationist response to it that I've just described may not be working so well anymore. He ends his book by speculating about the possible emergence of a third system of the arts.

Is Shiner's main thesis plausible? A fair evaluation requires attention to the rich tapestry of historical, cultural and philosophical analysis that he has woven in *The Invention of Art*; and I highly recommend such attention to interested readers. For now, because some readers may not be familiar with his work and because I have presented it so briefly, I wish to fend off some misunderstandings that would make his thesis implausible.

2. Two Objections to Shiner's Thesis, with Responses.

2a. Objection 1: It is implausible to think that Fine Art was invented in the eighteenth century West. What about Aeschylus, Praxiteles, Shakespeare, and Michaelangelo? What about the great art of non-western cultures, especially that made before those cultures had much contact with the West?

This is a natural objection to Shiner's claim, but it rests on a misunderstanding. He does not say there is nothing in common between artists or artworks or arts criticism or the experience of art products in the West before and after the eighteenth century, or between the modern West and non-Western cultures. [7] He does not imply that artisans in the old system could not express themselves, or create profound visions of life and the world. That would not be a defensible position. Rather Shiner claims that art was *divided* in the eighteenth century West. It was this division that made possible the emergence of Art in the modern sense. So attitudes we now have toward craftwork or interior decoration, and attitudes we now have toward fine art sculpture, might both be appropriate toward, say, a piece by Dellarobbia or a sculpture or salt-cellar by Cellini (TIA p. 38). In many works from the past we recognize the same formal and substantive characteristics for which we now prize Fine Art. Shiner's thesis does not imply that this must be a misrecognition. He only warns that our perception of these past greats and their work, as well as our understanding of the practices and products of other cultures, can be distorted by the controlling power of the Fine Art paradigm. They do not fit the Fine Art paradigm, and their works played a significantly different role in their cultures than Fine Art products play in ours.

Of course, if the differences between the traditional and the modern systems are too small, if there is too *much* in common between them, that would indeed defeat Shiner's claim. But arguably the differences are great. Several facts demonstrate this. First, the modern system makes possible much that is genuinely new and would not be possible without it. By the late nineteenth century this fact is obvious. Most modernist work (the music of Schoenberg, the novels of James Joyce, the paintings of Mondrian, Kandinsky and Jackson Pollack) would be inconceivable without the development of the Fine Art idea. For such works are valued as Art, independent of any overt social, economic, religious or practical function they might have. [8] They demand intensely focused attention in order to be understood. However conflicted their contemporaneous relationship to it may be, they depend for their existence on the art world: on galleries, critics, and art purchasers, *i.e.*, on those who take art seriously for its own sake and whose cultural identity prepares them to understand and value such work. Even at this historical remove, the popularity of most modernist work is limited. At the time of its creation it was restricted to a tiny cultural circle, and this circle would have been offended had they been accused of valuing it for any other reason than as Art.

Second, the distinguishing characteristics of the modern system are themselves new, and together they create a dramatically new set of expectations. One of these is the negative value of utility when considering a work of art. Art is supposed to be made for its own sake, not for some other purpose. Of course it may serve a purpose; but in the modern system it only counts as Art if it is valuable on its own independent of that purpose. Shiner gives a number of examples to establish that this expectation is indeed new. Likewise, the notion of the Artist as Creative Genius is significantly altered in the modern system. Genius itself is a very *old* idea, a version of the idea of divine inspiration. But in the modern system the artist is a genius rather than being *inspired by* a genius, and what genius generates is not so much preternatural skill as innovation beyond rules. In other words, genius is no longer the characteristic of an artisan. The third defining idea, that of (autonomously) Aesthetic Appreciation, is likewise radically new (*TIA*, pp. 130-153, 213-225). Finally, as already mentioned, the Unity of the Arts is a new thesis, unknown in the past, and it has a major influence on the practice and theory of art. The grouping of music, painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, architecture and dance as Fine Arts has created the impression that they must share essential characteristic, in virtue of which they receive this designation.

I take these differences to be sufficient to demarcate the modern from the traditional system of the arts, while allowing that some work could be recognized and valued for similar reasons under both systems. The Kristeller/ Shiner view survives this first objection intact.

2b. Objection 2: Shiner moves improperly from the historical emergence to the illegitimacy of the category of Fine Art.

In a review of *TIA*, Paul Barlow faults Shiner for his "...apparent belief that to point out that concepts and practices have histories is in some sense to prove that they are mistaken." [9] But, says Barlow, "neither a concept's usefulness nor its truth is determined by how old it is." For example, he says, the notion of schizophrenia emerged at a certain time in the history of psychiatry. But this does not make the notion illegitimate rather than representing an advance in understanding, nor does it mean that there were no schizophrenics in previous centuries.

It seems to me that this criticism of Shiner, like the last one, misses the

mark. It is, however, less superficial than it sounds, and deserves a little attention. The comparison with the supposedly scientific category of schizophrenia is unfortunate; presumably whatever the development of the modern Western concept of art represents, it is not a form of scientific discovery. But Barlow could easily have chosen better examples. In fact he doesn't need *any* examples to invalidate the principles that "concept C has a history, therefore it must be mistaken," and "practice P is of recent origin, therefore it's artificial and unfortunate." These principles are ridiculous. One can be fairly sure in advance that Shiner does not subscribe to them. Fortunately for the strength of Barlow's critique, he goes on to engage Shiner's actual views more seriously. Why, he asks, should we bemoan The Great Divide and view it as a kind of Fall, or think that it might or should in some way be transcended or mediated? Why not just take it as a development in cultural history, and if we must place a value on it, why not a positive one? Likewise, why not use the categories of Art and especially of the Aesthetic to illuminate our examination of artifacts and practices from the past and from cultures that have not separated these categories as we have done?

Shiner has answers to these questions, and to me they seem plausible ones. First, he does not see the emergence of the modern system completely or even primarily as a Fall. It is clear that he values much that the modern system has produced. He does not envision or hope for the end of such artistic statements, even if they have no "use" (*TIA*, pp. 303-307). What troubles him are the divisions that the modern system enshrines, the impoverishment of ordinary life that can result from these divisions, and the class and gender biases and cultural imperialisms that the modern system often validates. By his account of the historical origins of that system he means, at the least, to question those claims to universal validity that it implicitly makes.

Could one maintain that the categories of the modern Western system of art are indeed universally valid, in spite of their historical origin? Surely one could. To do so would be to adopt a strategy similar to that of Hegel, or perhaps his modern admirer Arthur Danto. It would be to claim that the concepts and practices of art and the aesthetic as they have emerged in the modern west are a truer and deeper and more maturely differentiated form of what was implicit in our human past and in all human cultures. As is the case with many such emergents, once the mature practice develops we naturally stand within it to sort out the confusions of its past. We see it stumbling toward *this*, in which we now stand. We see the separation between art, craft, and other skills as part of this cultural maturation. The by now global reach of the modern system might be taken as support for such a view.

Should the emergence of the modern system be seen in this way? Shiner's reasons for saying "No" are not based on the historical novelty of that system or merely on a desire to avoid charges of cultural chauvinism. Rather they are grounded in the modern system's flaws, its internal inconsistencies, its inability to maintain the foundational assumptions on which it rests, the ways in which it clouds our understanding or appreciation of the artistic values and practices of other cultures on their own terms, and the separation of art and life in Western culture for which he holds it partly responsible. If Shiner is right that the modern system possesses these characteristics, and if they flow, as he claims, from the historically contingent way in which it divides the arts, then he has good grounds to question the universal validity of that system and its assumptions. His thesis survives this second objection as well.

3. A Third System of the Arts?

Shiner closes his book by speculating about the possible emergence of a third system of the arts, one in which “the divisions of the fine art system” might be “transcended through a continuing struggle.” In what follows I will ask what such a third system might look like, whether there are any signs that it might be emerging, and finally what conditions would have to be met for it actually to emerge.

3a. What would a “third system of the arts” look like?

Shiner is wisely hesitant to be too specific about this. Nevertheless one can see what he hopes for, and frame some questions about whether it might be possible. I’ll begin by quoting his comments about a third system in the last two paragraphs of *The Invention of Art*:

The answer to art divided is obviously not to reject such ideals as freedom, imagination and creativity but to unite them with facility, service and function. Yet there is no magic formula for the correct balance. It would be silly to demand that every piece of music, literature or visual art manifest an equal dose of imagination and skill, form and function, spiritual and sensual pleasure. And, rightly understood, there is a time and place for disinterested attention and formal analysis as well as for the renewed interest in beauty (Brand 2000; Scarry 2000). In pluralistic democracies there will probably always be multiple art worlds, including small coteries who will consider only the most daunting and esoteric or the most socially and politically shocking works to be “real art.” But most people will participate in several kinds of art worlds, moving across the old divisions and hierarchies and juggling more or less successfully the relationships among art, religion, politics and everyday life.

. . .

We cannot resurrect the old system of art. Nor can we simply wish away the break that split apart the old system of art, arrogating intellect, imagination and grace to fine art and disparaging craft and popular culture as the realm of mere technique, utility, entertainment, and profit. Like other dualisms that have plagued our culture, the divisions of the fine art system can only be transcended through a continuing struggle. I do believe we transcend them in practice from time to time; what is harder is naming and articulating what we have done. (*TIA*, p. 307)

On the basis of this textual evidence, as well as other things Shiner says, I take it that the “third system” he envisions would at least have the following characteristics:

- a) It would preserve the best of the modern system, *i.e.*, it would still value works of creative genius for their own sake, regardless of their utility, and it would still support the making of such works.
- b) The arts would be more integrated with the rest of life than they are in the fine art system. In the right circumstances, utility, profitability and popularity would be positively valued within the new system, rather than being seen as either irrelevant or disqualifying traits. The result might be an “aesthetic of the everyday,” like that of traditional Japan, which values the elegant union of form and function. Here is Shiner again, first summarizing and then quoting Yuriko Saito: “Whereas mainstream western aesthetics can treat a kitchen knife as if it were a work of art so long as function is subordinated to form, an aesthetic of the everyday would attend not only to the knife’s visual appearance but also to its ‘feeling in the hand...its weight, and balance, but most importantly...how

smoothly and effortlessly it cuts” (TIA, pp. 305-306).

c) Thus popular art and music, craftwork, entertainment and design would be included as part of this third system. Nothing would be seen as “not art” merely by virtue of belonging to one of these fields.

d) Finally, the divisions of class, race, and gender which the modern system incorporates would be significantly overcome.

Is Shiner’s third system possible, and are there any signs that it is emerging? I will address the second question first. I believe with Shiner that such signs do exist. Since we are talking about a cultural system, the existence of such signs does not by itself establish the cultural possibility that a new system will actually emerge, so I’ll close by briefly addressing the first question.

3b. Reading the signs

1) Fine Art vs. Popular Art and Entertainment

The Fine Art idea remains extremely powerful, and there are no indications that it is fading or losing strength. However, it has also spread in recent years to the point where it plays a powerful role in the popular arts and in entertainment. One may see this as an extension of the assimilation strategy that has characterized the modern system throughout its history. I think that’s correct so far as it goes, but more needs to be said. First, what is happening is not always assimilation so much as a transfer of categories from one world to another. Creative people working within the fields of popular art and entertainment see these fields as a battleground between the forces of commercialism and artistic expression, at the same time as the high art world rejects their whole field as “not really art.” Yet assimilation of popular art and entertainment by the fine art world does also occur; and to the extent that it does, the modern system is taking on some of the character of that which it assimilates. It is becoming harder to dismiss popular art and entertainment as “not art.” Quite a few movies, quite a lot of popular music, quite a few graphic novels, a number of television series have the strength, originality, depth and imagination to bolster their claims to be art within the modern system. Yet they are popular, they are entertainment, they are profitable, they are made for the present more than for the ages, and they participate in an aesthetic of the everyday.

Along with the expansion of art categories to the fields of popular art and entertainment, and the presentation of such work in fine art venues, we may note the attention that philosophers and critics have recently been showing to these fields. It is no longer unusual to read criticism of graphic novels in the *New York Times* or to see essays on film or rap music or video games in the leading journals of aesthetics, or to see graffiti art displayed in galleries.

2) Craftwork

Craftwork is thriving in the West. But this is a different sort of thriving from that of craftwork in the West before the industrial revolution or in traditional non-Western cultures. In those settings, craft is necessary for daily life, and skill and grace tend naturally to be valued in combination (within affordable limits). In the contemporary West and increasingly in the rest of the world, craftwork is not valued because it meets everyday needs but because it is handmade, individual, and different from the mass-produced ordinary. There is a strong pull to assimilate such work into the category of Fine Art. One sees advertisements for “Fine Craft” shows, and every large city gallery district has galleries which specialize

in ceramics, wood turning, fine art furniture, fiber arts, and the like. Objects are shown, valued and purchased in these galleries in much the same way that paintings and sculptures are. Consider the example of "You Da Buddha," a meditation seat by fine furniture maker Tom Huang. (This and other pieces by Huang may be viewed at: www.wexlergallery.com/wexler.html! Click on Artists, mouse down to Tom Huang.) This piece sold recently for a total of \$5,000. The craftsmanship is exquisite, combining skills in woodworking and fiber arts; the object is one of a kind, and its gently ironic blend of humorous title, price, and obvious functionality give it as much meaning as a fine art product might need. Huang's website (www2.ku.edu/~sfa/dsgn/industrialdesign/huang/index.shtml) describes his work as "furniture based sculpture". He is an assistant professor of industrial design in a school of fine art, and his work was recently featured in *American Craft Magazine*. So he crosses the boundaries of the modern system in several ways. The sale price of \$5,000 for this object is plainly reasonable, given the quality of the piece and the amount of time invested in the making of it by a highly skilled professional. As art world prices go, it is on the low side. At that price, especially after the gallery takes its cut, Huang would have difficulty making and selling enough such individual pieces in a year to earn his middle-class salary. He needs his day job. On the other hand, a price of \$5,000 is forbiddingly high for anyone earning less than a solidly middle-class American income, and thus ironically dissonant with Buddhist ideals of simplicity and nonattachment. No doubt Huang knows all this, and his pop-culture title may be reflecting on the fact.

To some extent, the recent flourishing of craftwork in Western culture represents an extension of the fine art paradigm to cover certain elite products. A clear example of this is the 2002 name change of New York's American Museum of Craft to the Museum of Arts and Design. In announcing the change, the director said "craft" is identified with hobbies and fairs and the Board president spoke of it as associated with "trinkets." (I'm indebted to Larry Shiner for this example.) Replicating the invidious distinctions of the fine art paradigm within the world of craft in this way may be a regrettable development. But once again, assimilation of some craft by the modern system has its effect on the values of that system. For functionality remains a crucial element in craftwork. This is arguably true even in cases where it might seem not to be. Craft museums, galleries, and craft shows of the kind that are gaining fine art status frequently include examples of nonfunctional objects. Some are innocently non functional: they are sculptures made from clay, fiber, or wood. Some are "in your face" nonfunctional: the pitcher with a hole in its side, the impossible-to-drink-from "Hairy Monster Goblet" I once saw whose body (though not its base or stem) was entirely covered by extruded glass spines. Such playful items shout "I, too, am fine art! You want me to be nonfunctional, fine! I'm nonfunctional! Pin a medal on me, you dope!" But the skill of the maker, the obvious ability to make items that combine beauty, grace, or meaning with utility, is always evident. They come from a tradition where the elegant combination of form with function is highly valued. Wendell Castle, often credited with founding the modern Fine Art Furniture movement, provides an excellent example. He makes one-of-a-kind objects a person might want to display rather than use, but he also markets the Wendell Castle Collection, which, while a bit pricey, enables one to outfit one's living or dining room with some standard Castle designs (available only through selected galleries). Thus, once again, the fine art idea has spread, this time into the fields of craft and commercial production which it was supposed to exclude. But in the process it is being transformed to include some of those qualities whose exclusion has helped to define it.

3) Design

Design occupies an interesting and in some ways a contradictory place in the modern art world. It owes a great deal to the vocabulary of modern art. It creates and conveys many cultural messages. The symbolic weight and technical skill of contemporary design work frequently earn it a place in fine art museums. It is also commercial, if anything is. Industry, advertising, communication, and mass culture depend heavily on design for their power, as Stuart Ewen demonstrates in his classic *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. [10] Design shapes us; in a way it gives us the feel of who we are. It can work together with values we might approve to spread those values within the culture. The high end of the American office furniture industry, and the US Green Building Council with its LEED standards, do this with environmental values in their designs. Design work is skilled work; one trains for it in art school; one learns it as a craft. In fact, it regularly embodies the supposedly contradictory values of free creativity and uniform mass production, since skilled, creative designers are constantly making new styles that are then rushed to market and sold to our desire for freedom and individuality. Here, perhaps, an essential point about the "possibility of a third system" comes unavoidably to the surface. It is the question of the relationship between change in the modern system of the arts and change in modern society more generally. For in spite of their claim to autonomy, the arts are by no means unconnected with the structures of modern society. I now turn to that question.

4. Is a Third System of the Arts Possible?

The signs indicate that the modern system is changing. Some of its distinctions are beginning to break down. Popularity, entertainment value, and integral functionality are not automatically locking things out of the art world as effectively as they once did. If these phenomena are not universal, I believe they are prevalent enough to be significant. At least for the examples I've mentioned, the change seems best describable as a spread of the fine art idea to fields it was formerly thought to exclude, along with an expansion of high-culture art-world attention to popular art, entertainment, craft, and commercial design. As a result, at least to some degree, functionality, skill and entertainment value can be seen as positive elements of a work's aesthetic value. This is a significant transformation.

Yet it does not seem to me that these changes alone go deep enough to portend an essential conversion to a new system of the arts. In fact they are ambiguous. One may also see them as a testimony to the strength of the underlying structure of the fine art system. Its dynamics have replicated themselves within the fields of popular music, film, comic books, craftwork and design. This ability of the system's dynamics to spread beyond its original home and to transcend its original limitations should give us pause, and make us wonder if we have misrecognized its fundamental character. Paul Mattick has argued persuasively that the fundamental dynamic of that system is ideological. [11] To the extent that this is true, transformation of the modern system will require transformation as well in the organization of society.

One of Shiner's chapter titles describes the emerging modern system as "Polite Arts for the Polite Classes." The title points to the class origins of the new system, and Shiner gives plenty of evidence for the way this worked in the eighteenth century. He notes that the original dynamic is still at work in the newest trend of "craft as art" on which I've commented above (TIA, pp. 274-278). The modern system of the arts is

very tightly intertwined with the economic and class structures of the modern way of life. Poverty and class identity continue to limit both the access and the cultural capital necessary to understand and participate in the elite art world, and thus they continue to define sharp divisions within the arts, as in the rest of life. Those divisions are not going away; in one version or another they are replicated in every transformation of the modern system. "Artistic freedom," subjective individual genius, being *avant garde* and resistant to control are constant themes in modern art. These qualities are seen as contrasting with the stultifying forces of "commercialism," the culture of Kmart and McDonald's. The division between the "commercial" and the "authentic" continues to appear in the values of popular music, the movies, and what I've been calling "fine crafts."

It seems to me that the freedom they portend is in part genuine and in part illusory. First, some examples of the genuine: When Jimmy Hendrix went to Africa and the craze for electric guitar playing spread across that continent, and again when Paul Simon visited South Africa and made *Graceland*, many people feared that traditional African music would be replaced by repetitive knock-offs of western blues and rock. Nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, traditional African musical forms have survived, flourished, and spread around the world (as Ladysmith Black Mombazo sang when I heard them at my university, "Thank God for Paul Simon!") At the same time, new forms developed which blended Western influences with African forms to make township jive and other such new musics, and strongly stimulated the development of "world music". The results were unique and wonderful. Art of protest, resistance, and social commentary provides many other examples of genuine and often courageous artistic freedom.

In spite of such examples, I think we must recognize the truth of the point Paul Mattick makes so forcefully. Artistic freedom, in the modern system, depends significantly on that to which it is opposed. The more *outré* the work, the more this rule holds true. The art market depends on large infusions of money from those same commercial forces, whether that money passes through the hands of individual buyers of art or is conveyed directly by corporate purchases and grants. Its freedom does not pass to the poor. It is not correct to say that the arts are pure ideology; they are very far from it. But the unique ideas of the modern system, of art for art's sake, artistic genius, and the autonomous aesthetic come very close to being pure ideology. They do so most effectively, it seems to me, when they are used to divide Art from other things, and to devalue a product or performance as "not really art."

5. Conclusion

So where does that leave us? The poor were hardly better off under the traditional system in the West. Perhaps the question becomes what role all the arts might play, not only in their own transformation but in that of society in general. There can be no easy answer to this question. But one can't help noticing that electronic media have become remarkably affordable and are beginning to spread rapidly outside the developed world. It is no wild fantasy to suggest that they will be increasingly potent channels for social change. Walter Benjamin's speculations about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility seem if anything more relevant now than they were when he first wrote them. The possibility does exist within those media for very wide-spread participation in these arts, not only in listening or viewing but in production. And Benjamin's final question remains equally relevant: Will the forces of human creativity, intercultural communication and freedom win out, or will these media become primarily agents of propaganda,

commercial interests and the reproduction of the status quo? So long as we are not looking to the arts alone rather than to all segments of society for the answers to these questions, it seems clear, at least to me, that the arts have a crucial contribution to make in our quest. As one small current example from among the fractured diversity of things now called art, I point to the performance art of Damali Ayo <http://www.damaliayo.com/> , who has consistently and deliberately found ways to make her work available to anyone who wants it, outside the class-defined venues of galleries and exhibitions, through street performance (e.g., her Panhandling for Reparations project), You-Tube, and so on.

To sum up: Larry Shiner's thesis about the nature and origins of the modern system of the arts is plausible, and survives objections against it. It deserves to be taken seriously. His speculations about the possible emergence of a third system of the arts are intriguing, and there are indeed signs that the modern system is changing in some fundamental ways. Without a more profound analysis of the current relation of that system to the dynamics of wealth and class, speculation about a third system is hard to assess. However, it seems unlikely that a third system of the arts would be able to emerge, without corresponding changes in the class and economic structures of the modern world.

Endnotes

[1] Shiner, Larry, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[2] Kristeller, Paul Oskar, "The Modern System of the Arts," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, 1951, 496-527, and 13, 1952, 17-46; reprinted in Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[3] Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); also Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[4] Mattick, Paul, *Art in its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[5]

Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

[6] In the face of frequent misunderstanding, as well as the fractured pluralism of contemporary art, Shiner himself has begun to move away from use of the term "system" to describe what is happening now (personal communication, 2007). In the sense in which both he and Kristeller intend it, however, it seems to me that the term continues to be both appropriate and helpful in picking up the common function of the terms "art," "art work," "artist," and "aesthetic." While the argument of the paper does not hang on it, I have chosen to retain it.

[7] Stephen Davies, though familiar with Shiner's view, appears to misunderstand it in this way in his recent text *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 1-25). Shiner's view does not preclude the existence of human universals (image-making, story-telling, singing, dancing, music-making) or of other commonalities among any actual or conceivable systems of the arts.

[8] Whether this value is genuinely independent of these other functions is quite another matter. Shiner pays some attention to this question, most especially in his treatment of the origins of the fine art system. It gets less play in his discussion of contemporary issues, though it is not absent. See Mattick, *op. cit.*, for an examination of some of the ways contemporary art functions socially behind the screen of its supposed autonomy.

[9] Barlow, Paul, review of Shiner, *The Invention of Art* and MacDonald, *Exploring Media Discourse* in *Journal of Visual Culture in Britain*, 5.1, Summer 2003, 105-115, ref. 107.

[10] Ewen, Stuart, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (NY: Basic Books, 1988, 1999).

[11] Mattick, Paul, *op. cit.*

David Clowney

clowney@rowan.edu

Published December 21, 2008