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Michael J. Kowalski
mjk@postindustrialplayers.com

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The Curatorial Muse

Michael J. Kowalski

Abstract

An appreciation of the tension between the predicate, "to curate," and the subject, "the curator," is essential to understanding the convergence of creation, criticism, and administration in the graphic arts of our time. Curators were ideally positioned to step to the fore when the idea-versus-object dichotomy began to collapse in the work of Duchamp. The roots of activist curating can be found in Western Classical culture. The prevalence of conceptual art at the end of the twentieth century, combined with the explicit denigration of physical craft by artists, created a void into which activist curators moved. The curator's role as educator and referee in artistic style wars needs to be reexamined in light of contemporary analyses of the nature of power. Our understanding of the nexus of art-making, criticism, and curating is profoundly compromised by our skill in suppressing the many pious fictions upon which these activities are founded.

Key Words

art education, Bourdieu, conceptual art, criticism, curate, curator, Denon, flâneur, Großausstellung, Hegel, idea-versus-object, Kant, Kuh, the Louvre, medieval icon, Montaigne, museum, Pascal, power, Rancière, Reynolds, Szeemann, "Wack!" exhibition

1. Introduction

Pity the beleaguered museum curator. Mired in administration, fighting scholarly turf wars, courting egomaniacal benefactors and collectors, and attempting to infuse critical heft into the next blockbuster show, how does she find time to respond to the reconstitution of her profession as an art form open to every gifted flâneur with a knack for designing brochures?

An appreciation of the tension between the predicate, "to curate," and the subject, "the curator," is essential to understanding the convergence of creation, criticism, and administration in the graphic and conceptual arts of our time. An allergic response to the verbal form is now quite common.^[1] Contrary to the implications of current usage, the traditional curator did not *curate*. For a traditional, custodial curator such as the late Katherine Kuh,^[2] the predicate form implied a cavalierly stipulative, frankly creative role that incited "freelance novices to claim a professionalism sadly lacking, not unlike a first-year intern posing as an experienced surgeon."^[3]

The "freelance novice" is an easy target and, in most cases, a straw man. The dilettante who's given an opportunity *to curate* is the product of a profound shift in the definition not only of the curator but of the artist and the critic. A far worthier target of Kuh's professional jealousy would have been her learned near-contemporary, Harald Szeemann, a

champion of conceptual art, director of Documenta and two Venice Biennales, and an art star in his own right, "who took the art outsiders and made them insiders, making the uncollectible collectible and placing value on thought."^[4]

Like Kuh, Szeemann was largely self-invented, a polymath who defined the role of curator by integrating his personal mix of talents into the museum culture of his time. By 1970 that museum culture was itself undergoing an evolution, a movement away from the brick-and-mortar institution toward a notion of the *virtual museum*: an ideology of the presentation of works, a new consensus grounded in the history of the grand edifice on the boulevard but freed from its physical constraints, if not its social context. In this respect Szeemann's career, following on the heels of Kuh's tenure at Chicago by roughly a generation, did not represent a wholesale rejection of the key components of her definition of the curator. It was in many respects a reaction to changing circumstances, a tactical reordering of priorities, a recalibration of the relative weights of the critical, scholarly, administrative, and educational elements of the curator's mission.

Since the curator has traditionally occupied the strategic ground where the theory of the critic meets the praxis of the art maker, the curator was ideally positioned to step to the fore when the idea-versus-object dichotomy began to collapse in the work of Duchamp. The ground had been well prepared; the roots of Szeemann's activist curating can be found in Western culture going back to the pre-Socratics. The custodial model of curating and the activist model of curating are not clearly opposed. The fortunes of each point of view wax and wane as the focus of Western culture oscillates between word/idea and object/act. The history of this oscillation in the West is at least as complex and rich in paradox as the polemical history of iconoclasm. In order to understand the evolution of curating in the twentieth century, we need to review the history of strained relations between art makers and art philosophers. My primary focus in this article will be on the evolution of curating in the last two hundred years, but I shall begin much earlier. A brief survey of the roots of activist curating yields unexpected fruit: there have been several provocative analogs to the aesthetic ferment of our own time in the more distant history of Western art, particularly in the theological art controversies of the early institutional Christian church.

2. The Roots of Activist Curating

The curator plays priest to the critic's theologian. This may be a truism but, as in the case of so many apparently banal metaphors, the entailments are far from trivial and often overlooked. Whether the entailments of this particular cliché are overlooked willfully is not the issue. The entailments of the priestly metaphor need to be examined for the simple reason that they have a great deal to teach us about the unending discourse of crisis that gives so much of contemporary art-writing and art-making the whiff of a hoax. I hope to shed some light on these entailments.

The roles of priest and critic are highly fungible in practice. The curator and the critic may be one and the same. The

crucial point is that positing theories about the meaning of a body of artifacts can, and often does, precede the instantiation of those theories into collections and their manifestation as exhibitions. In order to understand the professional habitus of the contemporary activist curator, we need to consider the long and complex history of the tension in Western art between the idea and the object, between the verbal and nonverbal act.

Much of what is loosely described as the progress of Western civilization can be understood as the successive reinforcement over millennia of the dominance of the extrinsic, linguistic, and abstract over the intrinsic, gestural, and embodied. It's the story of an unresolved, and never quite equal, contest between the priorities of the viewer, idealized as an impartial judge or referee, and those of the maker, viewed somewhat more skeptically as a partisan, engaged player. To call this tension a "debate" would be quite misleading since most of the talking is done by the side that likes to talk. "The work speaks for itself" is drowned in a sea of guffaws born of received wisdom. This received wisdom, far from being a knee-jerk reaction, has incontestably profound cultural roots; it constitutes a tradition so strong that one takes the part of the nonverbal artist only at real peril of being laughed out of the culture profession.

A Baedeker of Western epistemology would take us too far afield from the topic of *art-making*. I intend to discuss the relationship of thought to *art-making* as opposed to *art in general*. Let us concede for the moment that the meaning of art *per se* is wholly within the domain of philosophy. Unfortunately, we can't begin to address the issues raised by contemporary activist curating without considering its origins in the history of art-speech. I make no claim that any curator living or dead has ever consciously heeded any explicit philosophical mandate or cultural precedent in the course of mounting a show or building a collection, but I do claim that such considerations form part of the common ground upon which all curators build their careers. Some of the components of this ground also serve the activist curator quite nicely in his or her quest to become an artist.

The notion that the fundamental act of creation is verbal is as old as Western civilization. Eight hundred years before the Evangelist wrote, "In the beginning was the Word,"^[5] Egyptian cosmogony already held that the utterance of a name was of its own accord an act of creation.^[6] Hebraic and Islamic theologies extended the preference for the word to an outright prohibition of the graven image. While Plato's philosophy of ideal forms didn't go so far as to prohibit the graven image, it did relegate the imitation of nature to the lowly role of an *imitation of an imitation*. Aristotle, freed of Plato's doctrine of forms, tilted the philosophical scales back somewhat in favor of the dignity of the act of representing nature *qua nature*.^[7] Toward the end of the Classic period, Plotinus shifted the focus of the debate again, with great consequences for the social role of the graven image during the Christian Middle Ages. Rather than seeing art as simply an imitation of nature or of an ideal, he maintained that art stood "at the point where things turn around and go back, where things return to the starting point on the path to the One and

begin the move toward reintegration."[\[8\]](#) This late pagan view, which imagines art less as a thing than as a methodology for attaining spiritual growth, provided a foundation for the aesthetics of the medieval icon. More to the Modernist point, when Plotinus urged his readers "to fall down no longer in bewildered delight before some one embodied form" but rather "to be led, under a system of mental discipline, to physical beauty everywhere and made to discern the One Principle underlying all, a Principle apart from the material forms,"[\[9\]](#) he pointed the way, however dimly, to Allan Kaprow.

Plotinus's assertion that the ultimate fate of the art object was to be sublated into a higher abstraction favors thought, or more precisely, thought about perception, over unmediated sensory pleasure.[\[10\]](#) Heraclitus set the tone for this argument almost a millennium earlier when he maintained that perception unaided by thought cannot free man from the limits of his individuality.[\[11\]](#) Plato reinforced the bias for a non-aesthetic reading of the image by making a case for the similarity of painting and writing.[\[12\]](#) Thus, through an affinity of dispositions, the expert writer became the expert viewer. This had profound implications for the culture of the medieval icon from Byzantium to Italy. The icon conforms at least as much to literary genres as it does to pictorial ones.[\[13\]](#) As for the pictorial genres themselves, they had been reduced to a stock of archetypes subject less to the caprice of the painter than to the control of the theologian.[\[14\]](#) Just as the contemporary curator might be viewed as a priest, the medieval priest might be viewed as a curator. According to the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa, the beauty of an image derives entirely from the qualities of the abstraction which it attempts to embody, but when "the higher begins to follow the lower in opposition to the proper order of things, then the deformity of matter abandoned by nature reveals itself . . . and that formlessness also destroys the beauty of nature, which, for its part, received its beauty from the spirit."[\[15\]](#) Whether an icon was deemed to be the true image of a saint was determined by church authorities on the basis of its assumed provenance, miraculous history, and the political exigencies of competition among rival monasteries. It was not a commentary on the skill of the painter or the quality of the graphic composition *per se*. In a passage clearly intended to resonate with those who remain wary of the explicit or implicit denigration of draftsmanship and painterly craft in much late twentieth-century art, Hans Belting observed that:

In principle, anything could be consecrated, a fact that would deny any higher status to images; if they depended on being consecrated, they relinquished their power to the consecrating institution. The priest would then not only be more important than the painters but also be the true authors of the holiness of the images.[\[16\]](#)

Rather than literally smashing icons, iconoclasts in the West have more often preferred to domesticate them under layers of ecclesiastically vetted interpretation. At the dawn of the modern era, Martin Luther reached a compromise between the Calvinist prohibition of the devotional image and the Roman

Catholic tactic of consecrating and thus fetishizing certain images. He excluded devotional biblical paintings from his churches but permitted them to be used in private, with the understanding that explanatory scriptural mottoes be added to the images in order to keep them firmly embedded in their correct theological context.^[17] Today, in the curiously private public space of the contemporary museum show, we're at home with the remote descendents of Luther's mottoes: *signage*—all of that carefully selected information and circumscribed critique posted by the curator at strategic spots to help keep our interpretations from becoming too eccentric.

The modern era adds a new wrinkle to the idea-versus-thing tension implicit in Western culture. An interesting oscillation begins to manifest itself, often in the same writer, between two subtly intertwined biases. On the one hand, thought is assumed to be difficult because it attempts to engage transcendent universals directly. On the other hand, thought is assumed to be transcendent and ennobling because it is so difficult. The fact that persons engaged in the making of objects are usually oblivious to the charm of this paradoxical feedback loop is taken as proof that they are operating outside of it, i.e., at a lower level. Even for an embodied work as abstract as a lyric poem, one pole of the difficulty/transcendence oscillation would stipulate that it's more difficult to analyze the work than to have executed it in the first place. As Montaigne observed:

Here is a wonder: we have many more poets than judges and interpreters of poetry. It is easier to create it than to understand it.^[18]

What was a passing note in Montaigne crystallized in Pascal into an attitude which would hold sway at least through the Enlightenment: a preference for the universal man over the lowly worker, whose efforts are channeled into a narrow craft:

Universal men are not called poets or mathematicians, etc. But they are all these things and judges of them too.^[19]

Pascal was neither naïve nor ironic. In view of the impossibility of acquiring anything like universal technical competence over the course of a lifetime, one is forced to interpret Pascal's description of the universal man as either the promulgation of a transcendental ideal or a pragmatic exhortation for developing a unified field theory of criticism that somehow marginalizes the exigencies of acquiring craft.

Kant takes the very preposterousness of Pascal's recommendation as one of the central premises of his critique of judgment:

The reflective Judgment, which is obliged to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal, requires on that account a principle that it cannot borrow from experience, because its function is to establish the unity of all empirical principles under higher ones, and hence to establish the possibility of their systematic subordination.^[20]

Making and interpreting do remain distinct in Kant "as a

practical faculty does from a theoretical, as Technic does from Theory (as mensuration from geometry.)^[21] In fact Kant goes so far as to admonish us not to associate the quality of beauty with ideas as such:

To speak thus of an *intellectual beauty* cannot in general be permissible; for otherwise the word beauty would lose all determinate significance or the intellectual satisfaction all superiority over the sensible. We should rather call a *demonstration* of such properties beautiful, because through it the Understanding as the faculty of concepts, and the Imagination as the faculty of presenting them, feel themselves strengthened *a priori*.^[22]

Kant has set a trap for the art maker: the price of restricting the notion of beauty to its manifestation in nature and art is that art must then concede the ultimate superiority of intellectual satisfaction over the merely beautiful. Although Kant's vocabulary and mode of argument are new, it turns out that he shares his fundamental premise with the early Church Fathers that the expert viewer's gaze is superior to the expert craftsman's hand *a priori*.

A generation before Kant, this delicate balance between the perspectives of talker and maker had already been articulated in less philosophical but no less penetrating terms by the portraitist and teacher Joshua Reynolds. In an address to the Royal Academy of Art, which he helped found in 1769, Reynolds urged apprentice painters to copy the conceptions of the great masters rather than their touch.

Instead of treading in their footsteps, endeavor only to keep the same road. Labour to invent on their general principles and way of thinking. Possess yourself with their spirit.^[23]

While he went so far as to characterize painting as a liberal art,^[24] Reynolds cautioned his students against an excess of reading that would end up distracting them from the practical side of their profession. He maintained a fine distinction between the complexity of an idea that informed a work and the complexity of its description:

It has been the fate of arts to be enveloped in mysterious and incomprehensible language, as if it was thought necessary that even the terms should correspond to the idea entertained of the instability and uncertainty of the rules which they expressed.^[25]

Both Kant and Reynolds demonstrated a keen appreciation for the complexity of the praxis-versus-theory tension inherent to Western art but, not surprisingly, each man ended up in a rhetorical straddle whose nuance, if not literal argument, subtly favored his chosen profession.

Hegel's sensitivity to the problem of understanding history, abetted by his utter incomprehension and impatience with the art of his time, led him to make a revolutionary move which resonates today perhaps more forcefully than it did in his own lifetime to define the maker-versus-interpreter conflict out of existence:

[T]he conditions of our present time are not favourable to art. It is not, as might be supposed, merely that the practising artist himself is infected by the loud voice of reflection all around him and by the opinions and judgments on art that have become customary everywhere, so that he is misled into introducing more thoughts into his work; the point is that our whole spiritual culture is of such a kind that he himself stands within the world of reflection and its relations, and could not by any act of will and decision abstract himself from it

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is.[\[26\]](#)

But even this Hegelian revolution was something of a consolidation, although Hegel himself seemed oblivious to the fact that he was merely reinforcing a precedent, that of the medieval church's sublation of art into theology. The fact that Hegel sublated art into what he termed 'science' rather than 'religion' shouldn't distract us from the historical continuity of his position. It should also not blind us to the fervent case that Hegel made for art, even as he tried to sublimate it out of existence. Whether the Hegelian argument is complex or merely inconsistent can be left for the close reader to decide. In the course of praising the visual arts for their ability to heal the breach between the universal and the here-and-now, Hegel denigrated that very same here-and-now as "merely external, sensuous, and transient."[\[27\]](#) The implications of his position for the practice of art only become apparent much later in Hegel's argument against craft. Manner, which "extends to the execution of the work of art, the handling of the brush, the laying on of the paint, the blending of colours, etc.," was for Hegel

the worst thing to which the artist can submit because in it he indulges simply in his own restricted and personal whims. But art as such cancels the mere accidentality of the topic as well as of its external appearance and therefore demands of the artist that he shall extinguish in himself the accidental particular characteristics of his own subjective idiosyncrasy.[\[28\]](#)

Hegel came close to conflating the profound union of brain and hand that constitutes the artist's mind with a mere accident of the moment. His notion of mind was clearly Cartesian, which we are apt to overlook since it so closely resembles our own. The absurd implications of Cartesian absolutism are only now beginning to be explored by philosophers and cognitive psychologists.[\[29\]](#) Suffice it to say that Hegel failed to take into account the implications of the contemporaneous work of Delacroix, Goya, Constable, Caspar David Friedrich,

Beethoven, and Kleist for his theory. His position resonated, despite its provincialism, by dint of its audacity: Stop making art, but do keep talking about it, and call that more highly evolved activity . . . *what?* art? philosophy? something else?

One naturally expects philosophers to answer "philosophy" and artists "art," but conspicuous counterexamples come to mind immediately: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Vattimo among the philosophers; Duchamp and Cage among the artists. The culture of mid-nineteenth-century France supplied a third way, a provocative *something else*: a stylish synthesis of Kantian aesthetics and Hegel's challenge to raise commentary to an art form. We know this synthesis today as *flânerie*, the art of the hip urban commentator. Constantin Guys, the Parisian caricaturist and archetypal *flâneur* immortalized by Baudelaire in his "Painter of Modern Life,"^[30] was no more a self-conscious neo-Kantian than he was a student of Hegel, but he worked in a society that was characterized by its response to Kant and Hegel. We tend to think of the *flâneur* as a creature of the boulevards, but he was equally the child of the museum. The *flâneur* was the first species of self-appointed curator. The origins of this peculiarly French story are worth retelling.

At the dawn of the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in France, from the waning days of the ancient régime to the occasion of Napoleon's second wedding in 1810, the Louvre evolved from an essentially private collection to a public institution with a didactic mission no less political than aesthetic. Precedents for the Louvre existed in Chrétien de Mehel's Imperial Gallery for the Hapsburgs in Vienna as well as in the first public art gallery in Paris and the exhibition of royal paintings that had been installed at the Luxembourg palace in 1750. Whereas the ideal of the Baroque *Kunstkammer* in the earlier part of the century had been to dazzle the eye of the aristocratic guest with the magnificence of a noble patron's collection, the Imperial Gallery and the Luxembourg were arranged to tell a more subtle political story, that of the evolution of the fine art of painting.^[31]

When Charles-Claude de Flahaut, the Comte d'Angiviller, was commissioned by Louis XVI in 1769 to create a new exhibition space at the Louvre for the royal collection, the political program was broadened to enlist the support of a rising bourgeoisie for the regime whose legitimacy was beginning to crumble. When Dominique Vivant Denon resumed the project of reconfiguring the Louvre under Napoleon in 1802, the legitimizing function of the museum had grown to encompass the average citizen. Not only did the role of France as Europe's leading military and cultural power have to be constantly, and one hoped, suavely, affirmed, but the citizen himself had to be legitimized as a worthy successor to the landed aristocrat as a pillar of the state. The publication of Johann Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* in 1764 may well have served as a blueprint for the courses of aesthetic education envisioned by the generation of d'Angiviller and Vivant Denon, but there can be no doubt that the curator as a creature of the museum was born of a conflict of interest.

Mounting a visual history of Western art entailed radical changes in the manner of presenting work, changes that

evolved quickly from the status of expedients to norms. Uniform top-lighting for works was introduced at considerable expense in the plans of d'Angiviller for Louis XVI's Louvre. The nascent profession of curating normalized the practice of taking visual art out of its functional context, framing it, and displaying it within a visual *cordon sanitaire*. A generation later Hegel ratified this curatorial move by denigrating the mundane uses of painting as mere decoration. When the individual work loses its individual social function, it can only be justified if it helps to tell the story of painting as a collective endeavor. In addition to consolidating the redefinition of the monarchical palace as a public educational institution, it could be argued that this "new fascination for exploring the course of art history replaced the old-style appreciation of the single work of art."[\[32\]](#)

For those not lucky enough to see the Louvre's collection in person, the museum's catalogs of monochrome engravings reinforced the illusion of historical inevitability conjured up by the collection's physical layout, since, as Belting points out, the reproductions "made different works of art appear more alike than they actually were."[\[33\]](#) The museum represents Western culture's most ambitious physical demonstration of the Kantian injunction to exercise the faculty of judgment. Aside from its philosophical and political aptness in the wake of French Revolution, this move had the convenient economic effect of helping to validate the market for contemporary artists' output. Now that art was being freed from the caprice of private aristocratic taste and the dictates of theologs, a canon of the best work of the past needed to be established, subject to those norms of social scientific inquiry worthy of an industry. The continuous struggle to redefine this canon was waged by scholars in the name of historical accuracy, and by artists for the purpose of opening a fissure wide enough to sneak their work in.[\[34\]](#) With the advent of the bourgeois museum and the rationalization of art collecting, it became impossible not to engage in this debate, to the extent that the debate itself competed successfully for the artist's time with the mundane task of making objects. The merging of the Kantian and the Hegelian played out in the figure of the Parisian flâneur, who saw all of society as a virtual museum whose primary value lay in the quality of observation that it inspired in the sensitive maven of the streets:

In the flâneur's perceptive vision, what appeared incoherent and meaningless gained focus and visibility. He brought alive and invested with significance the fleeting, everyday occurrences of the city that ordinary people failed to notice. The flâneur's expert knowledge of the city involved, however, more complex skills than systematic and dispassionate observation. It was accompanied, by all accounts, with a discriminating taste that allowed him to differentiate genuine quality from charlatanism in the goods and commodities that he observed in shop windows. In other words, he brought to the task of urban flânerie not simply the classifying skill of the natural scientist, but also the inner sensibility and moral compass of the sentimental hero.[\[35\]](#)

The spirit of flânerie dates back at least as far as Petronius and Martial and continues to inform the work of such diverse

artists as Laurie Anderson, Hans Haacke, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, but it lives on most conspicuously in the projects of activist curators. Although much has been made about the provisional nature of the Western concept of an individual *work* of art,^[36] the Modernist and Postmodernist gazes remain firmly rooted in the museum, occasionally as a foil for rebellion, but more often as the only viable template for synthesizing the interpretative context necessary to understand an arbitrarily specified object or event as *art*. We carry the museum within us.^[37]

As Mary Gluck observes, the flâneur exposes the epic possibilities of the banal.^[38] Two emblematic events in the tense period leading up to the Great War pointed to a serious realignment in art's relationship to the banal. The exhibition of Marcel Duchamp's first readymade, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), brought flânerie out of the street into the museum. A year earlier, the carnivalesque brouhaha that attended the theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre had already demonstrated the extent to which the banalization of the contents of the museum had advanced in the popular imagination:

[I]n the 1912 Mardi Gras procession, the stolen Mona Lisa took to the skies in an aeroplane. Postcards showed her calling out of a train window that she wanted to return to the Louvre.^[39]

Duchamp's signing of an altered postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa in 1919 as a readymade can best be understood as a gesture of affirmation: the public grant of an artist's imprimatur to the flâneur's canny recognition of an unnoticed shift in the sensibility of the streets.

There are three major consequences of preferring the interpretation of the beautiful to the act of embodying the beautiful in an object or performance. First, it explicitly denigrates less mediated, more ecstatic responses to art. Second, it tends to underestimate the difficulty of a specific craft's technical problems, as well as the potential of those problems to inspire works. Third, it becomes increasingly difficult, as verbalization builds upon verbalization, to resist a dangerous and intellectually dishonest tendency to argue from the specifics of one art form while applying conclusions across the board to all of those activities which we now know as "art," be they mimetic, non-mimetic, concerned with the making of flat objects, three-dimensional objects, the telling of stories, or the staging of performances.

When Arthur Danto and Donald Kuspit write about the end of a certain Euro-American tradition of painting and sculpture and refer to it as the "end of art,"^[40] they are continuing the same rhetorical game that the Socratic philosophers kicked off when they synthesized an ontology of aesthetics from selective observations about sculpture, drama, and music without paying heed to the profoundly different materials and procedures of those activities.^[41] A general theory of beauty was deemed more important than a specific knowledge of craft, even when the specific details of a craft were used to build the general theory. As Kant remarked, "it is not the object of sense, but the use which the Judgment naturally makes of certain objects on behalf of this latter feeling, that is absolutely great."^[42] Gianni Vattimo noted that Kant's point

of view holds that "what is pleasing in aesthetic experience is neither the object nor the individual's subjectivity, but rather its very communicability."^[43] The curator works within the fertile, contested ground where the object, the individual's subjectivity, the artisan's mastery of materials, and the issue of communicability intersect.

3. The Habitus of the Contemporary Curator

The sheer garrulousness of Western aesthetics notwithstanding, one needs to remember that the polemics of art existed as sort of disembodied reaction to the mute, overwhelming force of a prevailing physical culture of the craft of making things, a physical culture that answered primarily to the exigencies of technic and only tangentially to those of theory. The curator stands equally rooted in the culture of the object and the culture of the word. Contradictions are inevitable in such a straddling act, and these contradictions shape the habitus of both the custodial and the activist curator. Indeed, it is the individual curator's response to a small set of key problems stemming from the maker-viewer gap that will lead him or her to adopt a more custodial attitude in one show and a more activist posture in another.

Not surprisingly, activist curating turns out to be at least as intricately bound to history as custodial curating. The act of redefining a curator as a creator first and cultural custodian only by implication is still a project undertaken within the context of the layperson's precisely opposite expectation. No one is more sensitively attuned to the potential for contradiction, misunderstanding, and dissimulation in this regard than the activist curator, the more so since the dangers go largely unnoticed by the general public.

As if the praxis-theory dialectic weren't enough of a challenge for curators in their role as educators, the very nature of the theories to be embodied in shows is actually much more unstable than a typical glossy catalogue essay would have one believe. There is a clear difference between the difficulty of demonstrating the value of a previously established canon, on the one hand, and the difficulty of making a case for the museum quality of new works, on the other, to say nothing of making a case for new ideas about the very nature of the project of art. The nature of the power wielded by a curator in a given show and, hence, the complexion of that curator's educational function, varies with the type of theory being imparted. I shall return to the paradoxical nature of well-intentioned teaching later in this essay.

The modern curator, whether of a custodial or activist bent, is typically an expert in many fields: history, conservation, administration, and the production of shows, to cite but the obvious. Conversely, a large segment of the art-making community, following the lead of three generations of art thinkers, from Duchamp through Cage to Warhol and Allan Kaprow, has embraced the notion that skill in any narrow tradition of art-making is irrelevant and possibly an obstacle to the realization of ideational art. This partial consensus, abetted by the trend after 1945 to train painters in universities,^[44] made for strange bedfellows. Who can top the irony of Clement Greenberg, pope of abstract expressionist rigor, anticipating the position of Arthur Danto, fetishizer of

ersatz Brillo boxes?

[W]hat is the ultimate source of value or quality in art? . . . [T]he worked-out answer appears to be: not skill, training, or anything else having to do with execution or performance, but conception alone. Culture or taste may be a necessary condition of conception, but conception alone is decisive.[45]

The last thirty years of the twentieth century were distinguished by a cacophony of cross disciplinary theorizing, whose primary characteristic, aside from a persistent millenarianism, was its enthusiastic preference for rhetorical collage and mixed metaphor over linear argument: Derrida punning his way into epistemological dilemmas; Deleuze and Guattari playing fast and loose with mathematics; and just about everybody applying vaguely understood principles of textual deconstruction to apples and oranges. At least anecdotally, "it appeared as if the cultural energies that had fueled the art movements of the 1960s were flowing during the 1970s into the body of theory, leaving the artistic enterprise high and dry." [46] It was no accident that the influence of Harald Szeemann's *Großausstellungen* ("great exhibitions") [47] increased spectacularly from the 1970s onward. [48]

Just as nature abhors a vacuum and the thinker abhors a deficit of intelligent debate, it turns out that the audience for the plastic arts abhors a deficit of craft. In a moment of desperation, a perceived deficit of physical craft may be compensated for by well-argued essays in lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogs. If the artist refuses to dazzle the viewer with a deft technique that overcomes the expected limitations of an unforgiving medium, then it's left to the curator, as the organizer of Kantian demonstrations of the sublime, to step into the breach and address the deficit of wonderment. Is this possible without becoming, in the vernacular sense of the word, an artist? What are the implications of proxying for the artist while maintaining the posture of referee in the art game? As Canetti observed, the cultural critic aspires to emulate the medicine man, who undergoes a ritual death to his culture in order to return as a more acute observer of it. [49] To the extent that the curator wishes to get his or her hands dirty as an artist, this possibility of floating above the fray as a disinterested observer is comparably reduced.

The modern curator is torn between the contradictory injunctions of the Enlightenment to make demonstrations of the beautiful, on the one hand, and to acknowledge the sublation of art into philosophy, on the other. The curator of contemporary art who wishes to soar freely above the roiling ocean of contending egos that constitutes the international art market finds him- or herself instead becalmed in a sea of new work that denies, often without a shred of irony, the very concept of the *work*. In denying the work, an artist denies "the qualities that characterized painting and sculpture— autonomy, form, authorship and originality." [50] The curator who acquiesces in the derogation of these qualities by the artist is confronted with a stark choice: either supply these qualities in the conception and execution of programmatic *Großausstellungen*, and thus become an artist; or accept their

absence as the *fait accompli* attending a radical redefinition of the curator into an archivist or anthropologist of exceedingly narrow range.

Curators create physical manifestations of analytic theories formulated primarily by critics. And late twentieth-century criticism, by insisting on the superior creative nature of interpretation relative to the largely de-skilled output of contemporary plastic and conceptual artists, has made it difficult, if not impossible, for curators to resist the urge to redefine themselves as artists in their own right. In her 1979 survey of the expanded horizon of sculpture, Rosalind Krauss stated the strong position of modern criticism succinctly: "For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used."[\[51\]](#)

Arthur Danto takes this position even further by arguing that the commentator is the only person in our culture who can quote with integrity, "In saying that all forms are ours, then, I want to distinguish between their use and their mention."[\[52\]](#)

In other words, the art critic is free to roam the history of Western art, mentioning precedents at will, seeking illustrations and analytical conceits wherever they can be found, but the art maker cheapens him- or herself by quoting stylistically. Since it's impossible to sustain a tradition of art-making without referring to historical precedents and equally impossible to participate in the Postmodern aesthetic without referring to other work done in our time, the field of creation in the arts is left to the critic and the critic's proxies. Curators who ally themselves with this position cut themselves off from dialogue with the makers of concrete art.

The post-Hegelian program for sublated art, like any ideology, wills its own blindness. In his analysis of modern European fiction, Karl Heinz Bohrer shows how the self-understanding of creative writers was never more acute than in the century following Hegel. The same could be said for plastic artists in the century between Delacroix and Picasso. Not only was art *not* the handmaiden of the unified field theorizing of art philosophers but, beginning with Duchamp and continuing with increasing persuasiveness through the twentieth century, it could be said that art successfully challenged philosophy as a mediator of meaning. As Bohrer concluded, "philosophy lost relevance while art gained significance."[\[53\]](#) In the society of the spectacle, who in the end can distinguish with confidence between the *Aufhebung* of art into philosophy and its reversal: the *Niederholung* of philosophy into art?[\[54\]](#) The question is too abstract for even the most talented curator to demonstrate in an exhibition; nevertheless, the *impossibility of its resolution* lurks behind every practical decision that's made in the course of mounting any show of contemporary art. Staying the course in such tricky waters requires irrational optimism. The effort of will required to maintain such optimism is not unlike that required of an artist. Indeed, very little separates Nietzsche's Ur-critic, his theoretical man,[\[55\]](#) from his superman:

No longer the *artist*, [man] has himself become a *work*

of art: the productive power of the whole universe is now manifest in his transport, to the glorious satisfaction of the primordial One.[56]

One hopes that educator-curators will see themselves more as teachers than as Nietzschean works of art incarnate, but a paradox lurks even in the modesty of a teacher. The scholarly educator may seem humbler than the self-aggrandizing artist, but it's important to remember that pedagogy is also grounded in power: the power to divide intelligence into a lower order (the empirical world of the child, the student, and the laborer) and a higher order (the rational, categorizing, system-building world of the adult, the teacher, and the administrator). The skill of the teacher that allows him or her to transmit knowledge by adapting it to the partially formed intellectual capacities of the student is taken as sufficient proof of the superiority of the knowledge and attitudes being imparted. The fact that the atmosphere of the classroom robs much of the material taught there of its savor, except for the teacher's pets who've already bought into its culture of enforced stultification, doesn't discourage the committed educator. The master teacher may be highly self-critical, but he is also proud enough of his calling to reject caricatures of the pedagogue cramming students' heads full of received wisdom. As Jacques Rancière points out in his study of educational experiments in nineteenth-century France, the well-intentioned master teacher confirms students' sense of their inferiority in the very act of transmitting knowledge. The teacher is:

. . . all the more efficacious because he is knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith. The more he knows, the more evident to him is the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant ones. The more he is enlightened, the more evident he finds the difference between groping blindly and searching methodically, the more he will insist on substituting the spirit for the letter, the clarity of explications, for the authority of the book.[57]

Lesson number one of the master teacher is that the student shouldn't presume to read the book without the teacher's guidance. Rancière, in a stunning, counter-intuitive move, sees this as ideological conditioning rather than the encouragement of critical thought. Insofar as the lay audience thinks of the museum, the large commercial gallery, or the art fair as a giant classroom, the curator has to invent tactics for resisting a tendency toward the enforced stultification of the work on exhibit. To the extent that the curator succeeds in coming up with innovative solutions to the problem of seducing the viewer into an appreciation of one or another art theory *du jour*, the curator makes common cause with the teacher who succeeds in detoxifying the power structure of the school. Pedagogy is never pure, even for the pure of heart. This applies equally to a curator operating in the most apparently non-interventionist, custodial manner. This is, in fact, the crux of Rancière's rather cruel point.

Before leaving the subject of the curator as educator, we need to consider how it merges with the role of modern flâneur. The activist curator is not only an organizer of illustrative

exhibitions; he or she is, like the nineteenth-century flâneur, an active recontextualizer of human artifacts into interpretative frameworks. The authority to recontextualize has many sources, but as Gluck points out in her study of Parisian flânerie, "Behind the impeccably groomed and anonymous public façade of the flâneur, there lay concealed the private face of the professional man of letters."[\[58\]](#) There's always been more than a whiff of slumming in the flâneur's relationship to his sources on the street. Can the curator who is immersed in the art of the time escape a similar dilemma? Does the dispassion that allows you to recontextualize the tussles of rival gangs hopelessly taint your street cred?

Philosophical and methodological paradoxes notwithstanding, the curator remains a figure of considerable power, one of the principal actors, along with critics and collectors, in the continual process of redefining the canon of art. The curator may not imagine him- or herself to be powerful any more than the Williamsburg gallerist imagines he or she is part of The Academy; like most powerful people of good will, the curator is uncomfortable with the consequences of calling the plays in a zero-sum game. For every painter whose work is validated in a retrospective show, another artist's oeuvre will be tossed onto the invisible rubbish heap of failed vanity projects. Ever the astute observer, Canetti identified a strong undertow of *Schadenfreude* in the project of maintaining an artistic canon. The person who pronounces a painting to be "bad" wants this statement to sound objective, but has trouble resisting the implication, made clear in the thinly disguised pleasure with which the verdict is delivered, that "bad" work is done by "bad" minds:

In what does this pleasure consist? It consists in relegating something to an inferior group, while presupposing a higher group to which we ourselves belong. We exalt ourselves by abasing others.[\[59\]](#)

The degree of anonymity under which curators work may be a source of career frustration, but it's also a source of power. The curator who is not also a practicing critic typically works silently in the bowels of a great institution. No one really knows how curators go about their business. As Canetti observed, "secrecy lies at the very core of power."[\[60\]](#) The artist awaits the next big exhibition's realignment of the art universe, and his or her relative conjunction or disjunction with it. A verdict is delivered, perhaps provisional, but nonetheless a judgment, while the curator returns to the hidden precincts where the next essay in canon formation will be conceived. The artist appears helpless in the face of such a dynamic, but social dialogue is seldom so simple. As Canetti emphasized at the very beginning of his critique of power, "There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown."[\[61\]](#) In other words, I can create your power over me simply by willfully keeping myself in the dark, by failing to ask you what you do, for fear . . . for fear of what? of being touched? of discovering that you the curator know more about my profession than I the artist? Whatever the answer, it should be clear that curatorial power need not spring from a power trip on the part of curators.

But it may. As the activist curator approaches the status of an

auteur of exhibitions, to what extent can he or she remain immune to conflicts of interest? One expects Darwinian struggles among emerging artists, but the erudition and relative anonymity of curators has tended to shield them from scrutiny on this score. If such struggles were waged solely on the level of aesthetics, they would be complex enough, but it's quite clear that they're also bound to economics and the construction of social hierarchies. By virtue of his or her role as recontextualizer of the canon, the curator influences the development of art on two distinctly unaesthetic planes: in its role as an alternative asset class for highly capitalized investors, and in its function as a marker of social rank. The intersection of these two planes can be seen in Bernard Berenson's discreet relationship with the art dealer Joseph Duveen, where Berenson helped to close sales by furnishing expert corroboration of the canonic status of previously obscure paintings. The service provided by Berenson was scarcely different from the corporate credit-worthiness rankings issued today by Moody's. In both cases, well-researched, supposedly disinterested advice was offered for the related purposes of bolstering the confidence of a skittish buyer and stabilizing the overall workings of a market that continually needed to prove to skeptics that it could be, and indeed was, rational.

Of course, this analogy upsets the sensibilities of the pure aestheticians among us: critics, curators, artists, collectors, and casual viewers alike. We act as if art-making and interpretation sprang from a zone of pure contemplation unpolluted by the culture of buying, selling, and jockeying for status. The commonly held, naïve, and hence inexpressible attitude runs something like this: Art work may be sullied in the exchange economy, but at least its *conception* ought to remain immaculate. No one really believes in the Immaculate Conception anymore, but a world religion still revolves around it. Warhol put a dent in the consensus with his ingenious conflation of Duchamp and the ad agency, but in spite of his abiding attraction for the anti-establishment critical establishment, he remains for many art makers today a footnote, at best, the exception who proved the rule. Hip postures notwithstanding, our culture of pervasive irony still clings to just enough of the foundation myths of Romanticism to remain in a state of queasy denial about the socially-constructed, non-artistic foundation of art values.

The recontextualizing power of museum culture is still strong enough that it absorbs virtually all of the overt political and social commentary that artists presume to introduce. Explicit politics are detoxified within the *cordon sanitaire* of aesthetic discourse. One might question this assertion with any number of fair counter-examples: *What about feminist art? What about gay agit-prop? What about Socialist Realism?* The answer is that all of the overt political agendas of such work, sincere as they might be, are embedded in a more profound political context that subverts their surface content. "Political" work *is* political, just not in the way it was intended. The more overtly "political" the show, the more ironically, and definitively, will the dynamics of depoliticized recontextualization be reinforced.

Consider *Wack!*, the recent retrospective exhibition of feminist

art organized by Cornelia Butler for the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.^[62] The show spans four decades and includes hundreds of works by over a hundred artists. It includes pieces executed in a stupefying variety of techniques: painting, sculpture, photomontage, collage, essays, litanies, music, body art, videos, verbal documentation of performances, and installations. The technical level of execution ranges from the simply or purposefully crude to a technically brilliant mastery of traditional idioms. It's impossible in a three-hour circuit of the many galleries that comprise the exhibition to pay more than cursory attention to the political message of each piece. Meanwhile, the viewer is overwhelmed with the task of readjusting her mode of perception to fit the requirements of each piece's mode of execution: *Should I be looking here at painterly qualities? Should I be ignoring the visual appearance altogether in favor of a literal or implied verbal script? Should I take the elements of this collage as documentation, elements of an extended metaphor, or noise? Does the artist assume that I will read these two thousand words of densely packed pencil script? Was the roughness of this documented performance a withering comment on the slickness of other performances or merely an indication that painters often underestimate the difficulty of shaping time?*

One assumes that Butler conceived the exhibition as more than a series of semi-opaque moments. One assumes that the political content was supposed to do more than corroborate received opinion. For this to happen, the viewer must supply a subtle and supple integrative conceit, a notion of art open enough to encompass radically different modes of execution while remaining sufficiently well-bounded to unite all of this effort under a rubric that will elevate it above poster-making and blogging. It is the artists and curators who've decided to consecrate the work in the show as art, but it is the viewer who picks up the tab, metaphysically speaking. Meanwhile it's the artist and curator who stand to benefit professionally from the success of any show that tacitly or explicitly acknowledges the primacy of the gallery system. It follows that there are two overt, readily acknowledged, and contradictory political aspects to the *Wack!* show: its explicit feminist critique of society on the one hand; and its radically compromised expectation, necessary for any professional, that the viewer will bestow a sympathetic reading on what's essentially a careerist enterprise, granting it a transcendental authority that could only proceed from the very same ideology of Western art that many of the works in the show attempt to subvert.

The *Wack!* show is not unique in this regard.^[63] I cite it here because it is an outstanding exhibition, a well-conceived presentation of powerful work. Its quality helps to conceal its true socio-political content, which it shares with the ministrations of all priesthoods, and which I would describe roughly as follows: It is acknowledged, though not often discussed in polite company until the third drink, that the arts are defined by the same Darwinian savagery as any another profession. It is also acknowledged that the aspiration of art to beauty and truth is a pious fiction, but in the best possible sense of the word. Finally, and crucially, it's acknowledged that these two characteristics of art are seriously and permanently at odds with one another. The fundamental

politics of art revolve around the struggle to suppress this tension, to render it invisible, to declare it unproductive. This is meta-politics of the highest order: *the struggle to suppress an acute understanding of a struggle*. Freud would be comfortable in these precincts. The struggle to suppress or suspend an understanding of the competing motivations for art-making is fundamental, because it assumes *a priori* that the pollution of aesthetics by social pressure would be bad for art, when in fact it's not even clear that they've ever been distinct.[\[64\]](#)

The practical ramifications of this submerged debate are enormous and varied. The art world has been in a state of denial over its internal contradictions for so long that it's developed the capacity to deny just about anything and support any contradiction. Practice makes perfect. Donald Kuspit cites Marcel Duchamp as an art-philosophical godfather,[\[65\]](#) and then denigrates him as a charlatan in his next book.[\[66\]](#) Arthur Danto publishes theories of the end of Western art while continuing to review it, ultimately issuing jesuitical explanations of how the end of Western art doesn't necessarily imply the end of art-making by artists in the West. The New York art world listened carefully when Jean Baudrillard accused the entire Euro-American art profession of perpetrating a massive fraud:

It is necessary to distinguish clearly between . . . the moment of heroic simulacrum, so to speak, when art experiences and expresses its own disappearance, and the moment when it has to manage this disappearance as a sort of negative heritage. The first moment is original, it only happens once, even if it lasted for decades from the 19th to the 20th centuries, but it is no longer original, and I think we are involved in this second moment, in this surpassed disappearance, in this surpassed simulation, surpassed in the sense of an irreversible coma.[\[67\]](#)

It then proceeded to act as if absolutely nothing had been said —no offense taken! Into this fray steps the curator, who has to decide before each new show which aspect of art's schizoid denial of its manifest contradictions to avoid this time. No matter how the curator decides, he or she can expect to be excoriated as a meddler, dismissed as naïve, or both. Robert Storr's attempt in the 2007 Venice Biennale to reopen debate on the theory-versus-praxis tension implicit in contemporary art encountered just this type of facile rejection.[\[68\]](#)

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu built his career on successively more nuanced analyses of the function of the high arts as an enabling mechanism for the maintenance of class distinctions.[\[69\]](#) Writing as a politically engaged sociologist, he saw the growth of the importance of the curator as a consequence of increasingly frequent and elaborate *celebrations of art*, which "all combine to favour the establishment of an unprecedented relationship between the body of interpreters and the work of art, analogous to that found in the great esoteric traditions." In a clear reference to activist curators, he added that "one has to be blind not to see that discourse about a work is not a mere accompaniment, intended to assist its perception and appreciation, but a stage

in the production of the work, of its meaning and value." [70]

Although Bourdieu could usually see connections across disciplines, one boundary proved to be insuperable, even for him. Bourdieu talked about economics, politics, sociology, and education on their own terms, and he related the arts to all of them, but he stopped short of doing art the reciprocal favor of talking about art *qua art*. Had he done so, he could have proceeded to the final stage implied by his analysis. After examining the internal evolutionary dynamics of art on its own terms, in contradistinction to the internal dynamics of socially constructed value and class tension on their own terms, he could have explored how these nominally separate systems interpenetrate each other, modify their respective evolutionary trends in unexpected ways, and generally thicken each others' plots. [71] Bourdieu is the mirror image of the artist, critic, or curator who knows damn well that the plastic arts are a dynamic confluence of visual aesthetics, craft, literary aesthetics, philosophy, trendspotting, proselytizing, and social climbing, but who persists in bracketing off the polluting social elements. For Bourdieu the social scientist, the polluting element that had to be bracketed—treated in his analysis as if it were a black box, if not a Brillo box—was art. Art's revenge was that, in the years since Bourdieu's death, the paradigm of art curating has invaded every nook and cranny of postindustrial society. Clearly, the issues raised by the bureaucratization of the aesthetics of what used to be known as the visual arts still await a definitive study. The multitasking curator in the regime of incorporated aesthetics navigates a social matrix unknown to the Enlightenment philosopher of art.

Michael J. Kowalski

mjk@postindustrialplayers.com

Michael Kowalski's essays on musical aesthetics, political philosophy, and financial theory have appeared in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Critical Review*, and *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*.

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Endnotes

[1] *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), pp. 12-13. O'Neill responds to the suggestion that we may have already seen enough books on curating with the counterproposal that what we really need is a more heterogeneous approach to the subject. I attempt to rise to that challenge in this essay.

[2] Katherine Kuh (1904-1994) joined the Art Institute of Chicago in 1943 and was named its first curator of modern painting and sculpture in 1954, a position she held until leaving the museum in 1959. After leaving the Art Institute she wrote criticism for the *Saturday Review*.

[3] Katherine Kuh, *My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator*, edited and completed by

Avis Berman (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2006), p. 42.

[4] Norman Rosenthal, "A Force of Nature: Magnanimous and Unflinching, Harald Szeemann Broke the Mold of the Curator, and Helped Shape the Art World as We Know It," *Art + Auction*, May, 2005, pp. 64-66 ; ref. on p. 66.

[5] John I. 1.

[6] For example, the Memphite Theology, a stone tablet dating from around 700 B.C., includes the following passage: "Now the Ennead of Atum came into being from his seed and by his fingers; but the Ennead (of Ptah) is the teeth and the lips in this mouth which uttered the name of everything and (thus) Shū and Tefnūt came forth from it." See Henri Frankfort, Mrs. H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 64-68.

[7] This summary draws heavily upon Alain Besançon's excellent treatment of the philosophical critique of the image. See Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 25-62.

[8] Besançon., p. 50.

[9] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992), Ennead I, Tractate 3, p. 43.

[10] Closer to our time, Benjamin Lee Whorf constructed the positivist case for Plotinus's philosophical position. See especially his essay, "Language, Mind, and Reality," in *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. by John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1956).

[11] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, trans. by S.G. Lofts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

[12] Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d.

[13] Besançon, p.136.

[14] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.153.

[15] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 161c-164a. Cited in Besançon, p.100. Besançon proceeds to draw an analogy between Gregory's aversion to the lowly materials of the artist and Dada's rhetorical dismissal of the value of craft. My own argument follows from Besançon's.

[16] Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 7.

[17] Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, pp. 466-467.

[18] Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cato the Younger," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), p. 171.

[19] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), §587, p. 199.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J.H. Bernard (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), p.17.

[21] Kant, p.183.

[22] Kant, pp. 267-268.

[23] Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art* (Gloucester, England: Dodo Press, 2009), p. 13.

[24] Reynolds, p. 6.

[25] Reynolds, p. 80.

[26] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975), I, pp.10-11.

[27] Hegel, p. 8.

[28] Hegel, pp. 291-292.

[29] For excellent discussions of how motor experience is fundamental not only to our logical categories but also to any non-absurd concept of mind, see Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and W. Teed Rockwell, *Neither Brain nor Ghost: A Nondualist Alternative to the Mind-Brain Identity Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

[30] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995).

[31] This summary draws heavily on Andrew McClellan's excellent study, *Inventing the Louvre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[32] Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, trans. by Helen Atkins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 37.

[33] Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, p. 38. Could the modern website be imposing a comparably false sense of equivalence among the artifacts of our culture?

[34] And thus was the avant garde born. The ramifications of the complex embedding of the system of aesthetic validation within a broader context of social validation are explored in Michael Thompson's brilliant and unjustly overlooked study, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). The fact that Peter Bürger's ponderously argued theories of avant garde literature, which appeared in English five years after the publication of Thompson's essay, should have become a canonic text for art critics, while the deft and humorous argument of *Rubbish Theory* was largely ignored, says a great deal about North American writers' knee jerk obeisance to Continental theory. I do not exempt myself from the charge.

[35] Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban*

Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 75-76.

[36] Hans Belting's critique of the notion of the work in the plastic arts is complemented by Lydia Goehr's ontology of the musical work. See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[37] While the function of the museum as a public institution and its relationship to the art of our time undergoes radical reevaluation in Europe and North America, it's worth noting that the original program of the Louvre as an educational institution and strategy for creating political consciousness through art lives on in the developing world. For an exposition of the role of art institutions in creating national cultural consciousness, see Néstor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[38] Gluck, p. 85.

[39] Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, p. 280.

[40] See Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); also see Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Bollingen Series XXXV: 44 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[41] For an excellent analysis of the tension between the ontology of beauty and the technic of art from the Socratics through Kant and Hegel to Heidegger and Gadamer, see Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. by Santiago Zabala and trans. by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Vattimo concludes his vigorous case for the truth value of the art object with the stirring declaration that "art wishes to defend its own truth appeal in radical opposition to the truth of science and philosophy." But even Vattimo, one of art's most ardent friends among professional philosophers, can't bring himself to cross the last frontier, where the nonverbal gesture might be equal to or even privileged above the word. In the end he reminds us unequivocally that "the being of man coincides with his belonging to the world of language." See Vattimo, pp. 162 and 148. To my knowledge no philosopher or critic has ever demonstrated how this fatal unwillingness doesn't compromise otherwise generous intentions toward art.

[42] Kant, p. 110.

[43] Vattimo, p. 132.

[44] As Kaprow observed, "The university training that most artists receive today gives them reasons to doubt art and the means to both destroy it and re-create it. Experimentation is a philosophical affair . . ." See Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 76.

[45] Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," *Encounter*, Dec., 1962, reprinted in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*,

1957-1969, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 132.

[46] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 184.

[47] Großausstellungen: Blockbuster shows which are provocatively and eccentrically organized around a central theme, a sort of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk of the art environment.

[48] While Szeemann was blurring the boundary between exhibition designer and artist from the curator's side, the Belgian poet and filmmaker Marcel Broodthaers was blurring it from the artist's side in a series of works based upon the idea of a fictional museum (1968-1972). For both Szeemann and Broodthaers, the exhibition space was the canvas. Broodthaers's work was featured in the legendary super-exhibition *documenta 5* (1972) in Kassel, which was directed by Szeemann.

[49] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), p. 291.

[50] Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, p. 384.

[51] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring, 1979), reprinted in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 46.

[52] Danto, *After the End of Art*, p. 206.

[53] Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. by Ruth Crowley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 97.

[54] In its hour of triumph over artmaking, philosophy has not so much replaced art as it has collapsed into it. Rather than art becoming philosophy, much philosophizing has degenerated into maladroit prose poetry. A good example would be Jean Baudrillard's Delphic interviews.

[55] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), p. 92.

[56] Nietzsche, p. 24.

[57] Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 7.

[58] Gluck, p. 78.

[59] Canetti, p. 296.

[60] Canetti, p. 290.

[61] Canetti, p. 15.

[62] It's worth pointing out that Butler is listed in the show's catalogue as the "organizer," not the "curator" of the show. See *Wack! Art and The Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: The

Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).

[63] The *Wack!* show is one of the best examples of a show whose content requires the viewer to test his or her faculty for creating a private, ad hoc mental museum. A different set of dilemmas arises when activist curators mount aggressively themed exhibitions utilizing a narrower and more traditional range of pieces. In a frankly thematic show such as *Cézanne and Beyond* at the Philadelphia Museum (February 26, 2009 - May 31, 2009), the viewer is required, although this is never admitted, to weigh the relative benefits of assuming a passive attitude, temporarily suspending any major disagreement with the curators' notion of influence and affinity, or a hostile and active attitude that calls for a constant expenditure of subconscious energy in an effort to suppress any awareness of the curators' program. This is, of course, an experience familiar to all but the most casual of museum-goers. The tension varies with the subtleness and quality of the thematic intervention.

[64] The business of defining the broader social context within which art functions is preposterous enough within one's own time and culture without extending the exercise to times and places for which there are no living witnesses. This isn't an argument against writing history, but it does strike me as an adequate reason to refrain from putting the art culture of past centuries on the psycho-social-analytic couch in a way that I might indeed find useful with the art culture of my own time. All of my references to the historical sources of activist curating should be interpreted in this light. I actually have little interest in imagining *how things were back then*. I'm interested primarily in how our notion of *how things might have been* affects our current self-critique.

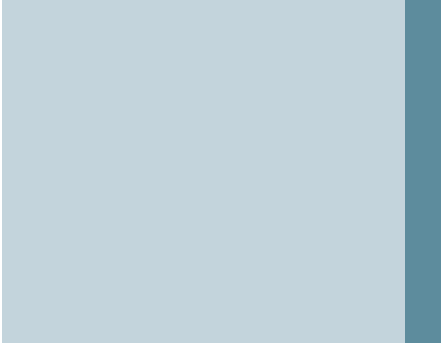
[65] See Kuspit, *Redeeming Art*, p. 280: "Like Duchamp, who distinguished between what he called the pole of the object and the pole of the viewer, I give the viewer almost complete leeway. As Duchamp said, the viewer creates the object as art."

[66] See Kuspit, *The End of Art*, p. 45: "Duchamp was an envious spoiler, spoiling whatever he touched out of envy . . . Perhaps his greatest achievement is the discrediting and undermining of the aesthetic. It is a triumph of destructiveness that has corrupted twentieth century creativity."

[67] Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), p. 107.

[68] Negative reactions to Storr's motto for the Biennale, "Think with the Senses—Feel with the Mind. Art in the Present Tense," were revealingly overwrought. See Jessica Morgan, "Categorical Imperatives," *Artforum*, September, 2007.

[69] Bourdieu's large sociological study, *Distinction*, appeared in France in 1979. The essays collected in *The Field of Cultural Production*, which explore the theme of professional habitus, appeared originally in the 1980s. *Pascalian Meditations*, which includes Bourdieu's critique of scholarship and its relationship to the production of belief, appeared in France in 1997.



[70] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson, various translators (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 110.

[71] The primary attraction of Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* is that it does begin to explore the ramifications of merging different analytical conceits drawn from different professional biases into new and sometimes shocking hybrids. See Thompson, pp. 13-33, on kitsch and collectibles, and pp. 103-130, on art and economics.