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The Role of the Artist in Contemporary Art

Chad Dawkins

For Amy

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1. Introduction

There is no contemporary art, only contemporary artists.

The more ‘enlightened’ the authority system, that is, the more accepting of ‘strange,’ ‘alternative’ art, the more it has to be outfoxed by the absurd that lies outside it.

In their illness, believers appeal to God; agnostics to the absurd.¹

We are going to talk about contemporary art. To begin we ask, what is contemporary art? The generally understood answer is it is art made by living artists. Terry Smith gives the definition more depth when he insists, “Contemporary art is the institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself *to itself* and to its interested audiences.”² Contemporary art is a term which describes not only art made today but works of art satisfying certain stylistic requirements most often manifested through the medium of *installation* and usually it *examines, investigates, or interrogates* something. Contemporary art is art being made by artists living in the contemporary world. The main concern here will be that of the artist in the contemporary world.

1. Giorgio Agamben, remark during lecture August, 2011.

Donald Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical,” *artnet.com*, 2005.

Andre Malraux, “The Voices of Silence,” quoted in Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Soundproof Room: Malraux’s Anti-Aesthetics*. Trans. Robert Harvey. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 100.

2. Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009) 241. (emphasis added)

The avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, the rise of concept-driven work, and postmodernist reconsiderations of everything and everyone have greatly expanded the opportunities for exploration in the arts. But at the same time, standards and expectations of the practitioners within its confines have evolved slowly and not without resistance. The artists, the historically understood creators (authors) of works of art, have found themselves afforded almost limitless liberties in the way of expression, but these liberties are not without consequence. The understood role of the artist has to be smashed. Any romantic notions of a tortured genius have to be replaced by an understanding that today artists are but one character in an art world of business, highly critical of itself and the world around it, and populated by a host of characters struggling for power and influence. Part of this struggle involves the evolution of expectations, ideas, and of clearly defined roles within a larger world--as confused as the more specific and self-conscious art world.

Julien Kreimer points to the confusion of our time “when no one seems to know what they ought to think, the same uncertainty, with its rhetorical elisions and shifts, has invaded the structure of painting as a discipline.”³ Furthermore, the limitless expansion of art (and its characters) to representing any and all aspects of life add to the confusion by, as Jean Baudrillard says, “diverting the real by taking it literally.”⁴ Making all of reality subject to art’s representation “we have not stopped accumulating, adding, raising the stakes. We are now plunged in...the disenchanting illusion of profusion.”⁵

Artists, curators, critics, collectors, publishers, art institutions and their administrators, spectators, collaborators, fabricators, janitors, interns--all of these positions have become

3. Julian Kreimer, “Painting Under Obama,” *Paper Monument* 4 (Summer 2013), 34.

4. Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*. Ed. Sylvere Lotringer. Trans. Ames Hodges. (New York: Semiotext(e)) 2005, 114.

5. Baudrillard, 114.

malleable--there are rarely any hard-and-fast rules as to who or what one can call themselves in today's art world. But, these roles, these labels do still mean something--they produce understanding of social importance. With the possibility of expansion and redefining identities, many have taken to social mimesis--appropriating--the traits or practices of others within the profession. Curators act as artists. Artists critique. Publishers curate editions. Others absorb the roles and practices of other disciplines--namely within the humanities and social sciences. Some have abandoned professional models in search of more domestic or everyday roles. But these experiments in expansion have consequences, in that, following Plato's charge against the artists' mimetic approach, artists are not showing truth at all--instead they are leading us further away from it. Baudrillard insists that "Art is never the mechanical reflection of the positive or negative conditions of the world, it is its exacerbated illusion, its hyperbolic mirror. In a world devoted to indifference, art can only add to this indifference."⁶

The modes and forms of art have encompassed the whole of reality and beyond. Working as an author of reality does not come without resistance--even from within. Artist Seth Price's position is that "artist as a social role is somewhat embarrassing, in that it's taken to be a useless position, if not a reactionary one: the practitioner is dismissed as either the producer of over-valued decor, or as part of an arrogant, parasitical, self-styled elite."⁷ Perhaps then, the artist seeks to legitimize himself by adopting the legitimacy he sees in others or to represent professionalism. Regardless, for artists, the objectives of pursuing and maintaining a career as an *artist* and presenting themselves as such remain paramount.⁸

6. Baudrillard, 115.

7. Seth Price, *Dispersion*, (self published 2000). Available online <<http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion08.pdf>>.

8. Proof is found in the language used for exhibition announcements where over-inflated academic-speak and art jargon are used to make grandiose claims about the artist's work. Evidence of archival and anthropological tendencies are found in a number of contemporary exhibition announcements. For example: "The

1.1 Defining the artist

In a recent exhibition catalogue, the following statement is found as part of the artist's, Marine Hugonnier's, submission: "An artist could be, perhaps, a geographer, a sound engineer, a camera operator, an anthropologist. He or she would be the sum of these activities, because no single one would summarise [sic] what the artist is."⁹ Seth Price, in his self-published *Dispersions*, echoes Martha Rosler's statement that the "as-if approach, where the Conceptual work cloaks itself in other disciplines (philosophy being the most notorious example), provok[es] an oscillation between skilled and de-skilled, authority and pretense, style and strategy, art and non-art."¹⁰ These oscillations and Hugonnier's proclamation that an artist is the "sum of these activities" highlight the confusion of the contemporary artist. An artist trades in creativity as part of the so-called cognitive class. Perhaps they are the progeny of the historic scribes and mystics. Lots of assumptions and romantic ideas and images of the artist populate the social conscious. Kant's notion of artistic genius has simultaneously tainted any realistic analysis of the artist as a professional and glossed over Plato's declaration of the artist as a fraud. While non-artists glorify them, artists, it seems, find their idols elsewhere. Donald Kuspit critiques the glorification of creativity observing "ironically, the celebration of creativity in our society—scientific and technological creativity more than artistic creativity, which looks less insightful and useful at first

films...demonstrate an evident closeness to the tradition of documentary and/or ethnographic films; appropriating the genre's capacity to assume a critical point of view that goes beyond the sole portraying of events. While subverting the documental archive, the artist's exploration incorporates fictional elements in determined situations...The film is an approximation to physical structures, time and places conceived as an assemblage; departing from a subtle and seemingly left behind position which sustains its subjects' livelihood by gathering waste materials discarded by progress, and in doing so, tests the possibilities of other ways of life." <<http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/beatriz-santiago-munoz-and-moris/>>. Many examples are found at <<http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/>>.

9. Hugonnier, "Travail Contre Productif," In Baldon and Lafer, *Counter-Production: Part 1*, 29.

10. Price, *Dispersion*.

glance—is also responsible for the fact that contemporary art seems more vital than historically reified art.”¹¹ Addressing the impact of this confusion on contemporary art, he maintains, “At the same time, the indiscriminate adulation of creativity—virtually any kind of creativity, leading to the labeling of any kind of activity as creative if it is performed ‘differently’—is responsible for the overcrowding of contemporary art.”¹² He makes clear that the dissolution of boundaries and the de-skilling of artists have a special impact on the world of contemporary art. “It is paradoxically the loss of standards of creative excellence that makes art vulnerable to market and populist forces. They alone can make an art ‘historical’ and ‘meaningful’ when it is no longer clear what the value of art is.”¹³ In such a market-driven art world, the idolization of creativity would be meaningless. Today, the only tangible evidence of an artwork’s value is simply that it exists.

Relying on history, self-comparison, and confusion, contemporary artists find themselves looking farther out into an ever expanding field of art. Seeking to redefine their role, artists work via recontextualization to produce evidence of their existence. What are the implications historically, professionally, and aesthetically of the trend to recontextualize every creative possibility as a readymade? To make sense of this it is necessary to ask, what is the role of the artist in contemporary art?

11. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

12. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

13. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

2. Contemporaneity

There is a mutual annulment of art and reality. Before, they used to potentialize each other, now they cancel each other out....Now the system devours and surrounds you....There is no way out of art, and no way of objecting to it. Now the system does everything, recycling itself just like fashion...However hard you try, you can't escape it....Contemporary art is...purely contemporary. It is contemporary of itself. It closed this circle.¹⁴

To understand the role of contemporary artists, the work they pursue, and the world in which they live, we must have some idea of what this particular “contemporary” is. Contemporary is not a measurement of time, but more or less signifies the present. A present in which, as Boris Groys declares, “we decide to lower our expectations of the future or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now.”¹⁵ Defined sometimes broadly (a human life-span) sometimes narrowly (the current season) it always implies a nearness to the immediate past and future. Unlike chronological time, the term contemporary has become the catch-all label for art made today. Terry Smith claims the art-historical labeling of contemporary “could well come to mean periodlessness, being perpetually out of time, or at least not subject to historical unfolding.”¹⁶ What does this uncertainty of place-in-time suggest for contemporary art making? A common suggestion is that “Most works of

14. Baudrillard, 78.

15. Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art?* 24.

16. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 245.

contemporary art, if they aspire beyond conformity or anachronism, are de facto suggestions as to what a work of contemporary art might be in circumstances such as these.”¹⁷ Or more simply, that contemporary art has to look like contemporary art. How do artists contend with these contemporaries? Dieter Roelstraete expresses a typical response to contemporaneity:

Not only is it [contemporary art] merely ‘of’ the times (the minimal definition of contemporaneity), it basically bestows value upon these times simply by so desperately wanting to infiltrate, inhabit, and if possible even shape it....contemporary art’s reluctance, if not outright refusal—and that is as close as it comes to assuming a programmatic stance—to preclude certain (that is to say, *any*) forms, practices, or tropes from being named art. We have long known that anything and everything can be art, but in our contemporary cultural climate this equation has taken on a different quality, one in which, conversely, contemporary art can be anything and everything....The critical question then becomes not so much ‘what is contemporary art?’ but, much more typical for contemporary art as such: ‘what is *not* contemporary art?’¹⁸

Or as Groys asserts, “contemporary art is less a production of individual artworks than it is a manifestation of an individual decision to include or exclude things and images that circulate anonymously in our world, to give them a new context or to deny it to them.”¹⁹

17. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 263.

18. Roelstraete, “What is Not Contemporary Art?: The View from Jena.” In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art?* 193.

19. Boris Groys, “The Topology of Contemporary Art,” In Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. 76.

2.1 Confusion

Confusion has increasingly become a part of contemporary art. Roelstraete points to “that process of willful confusion that is so characteristic of that which is specifically ‘contemporary’ in contemporary art, namely its very state of confusion (as to its own future, borders, and sense of ‘belonging’).”²⁰ So contemporaneity’s confusion breeds confusion in the arts; art, in turn, adds to the confusion by way of its engagement with it. This confusion is brought on by too much clutter, too much information, too many options. The confusion of overabundance is fertile soil for contemporary art’s self-comparative tendency. Groys contends that “modernity shed all that seemed too heavy, too loaded with meaning, mimesis, traditional criteria of mastery, inherited ethical and aesthetic conventions, and so forth. Modern reductionism is a strategy for surviving the difficult journey through the present. Art, literature, music, and philosophy have survived the twentieth century because they threw out all unnecessary baggage.”²¹ Furthermore, “They show that one can give up a great deal—traditions, hopes, skills, and ideas—and still continue one’s project in this reduced form.”²² On the one hand, by jettisoning unnecessary embellishments a reduced idea can pass on more easily, unencumbered by the weight of its collected history. On the other hand, dumbed-down versions of an idea travel faster and farther. They may seem more universal, but they also make the work of universalizing thought easier. Because, as Groys furthers, “these radical reductions also reveal a kind of hidden truth that transcends their immediate effectiveness. This truth also made the modernist reductions transculturally efficient—crossing a cultural border is in many ways like crossing the limit of the present.”²³

20. Roelstraete, 192.

21. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 25.

22. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 25.

23. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 25.

2.2 Self-comparison

So what are circumstances such as these? According to Michael Foley, today we inhabit a reality in which “image triumphs over content, presentation over understanding, description over analysis.”²⁴ These are the conditions inherited from postmodernism attempts to explode the tenants of modernism. Because of this, any look around or forward is equally met with a look back, a comparison—a tempering of attempts to move thought forward by constant self-comparison. Groys contends, “contemporary art can be seen as art that is involved in the reconsideration of the modern projects. One can say that we now live in a time of indecision, of delay—a boring time.”²⁵ Donald Kuspit claims that Malraux’s idea of the “‘museum without walls’ has been realized, resulting in the unlimited expansion of the contemporary. The radical pluralism that prevails in the museum without walls has made a mockery of the belief that there is one art that is more ‘historical’ than any other. Thus history has become as absurd and idiosyncratic as the contemporary.”²⁶

An epidemic of cultural archaeology has emerged thanks to obsessive concerns with ourselves, our stories, and how they compare. An attempt to mine the whole of history and (at once) to examine the commonalities and differences. Giorgio Agamben describes this form of archaeology:

An archaeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living. What remains un-lived therefore is incessantly sucked back toward the origin,

24. Michael Foley, *The Age of Absurdity*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010) 118.

25. Groys, “Comrades of Time,” 26.

26. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

without ever being able to reach it. The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived.²⁷

This attention to a cultural archaeology has implications for defining our contemporary age. Agamben furthers, “The attention to this ‘un-lived’ as the life of the contemporary. And to be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been.”²⁸ We are historically displaced and have become confused by our attempts.²⁹

2.3 Economics

Economics are a source of contemporary confusion, too. Theories of post-Fordism, post-Marxism, post-Globalization reframe economic understandings. The bottom line is that artists are reacting to the trends and most importantly to respond to the shift from goods-based economies to service-based structures. As Jorg Heiser illustrates, the art created in this confusion proves: “The perversely hybrid nature of today’s cultural and political landscape has had an effect on the tendency of art to settle into one aspect of the triad of production, distribution, and consumption... Now, it seems all three are turned into a wildly whirling medley, and again it’s hard to resist the comparison to the Internet’s effect of equally blurring the lines between

27. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and other essays*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009) 51.

28. Agamben *What Is an Apparatus?* 51.

29. Our contemporary confusion is exemplified by Sartre’s ideas of more than a half-century ago. He writes, “Of course the very apprehension of the world as totality causes the appearance alongside the world of a nothingness which sustains and encompasses this totality.” Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (New York, Washington Square Press, 1969) 251.

production, distribution, and consumption more radically and fundamentally than ever before.”³⁰

2.4 Indifference

Contemporary art seeks historical self-comparison; its ideas and goals are related to its time’s confusion. Simultaneously, through this confusion contemporary art is placed in a position of being yet another mediator among many. But for contemporary artists everything is fair game. “Nothing is sacred to artists who insist on their contemporaneity, because the contemporary is always profane.”³¹ The field of contemporary art has expanded exponentially to include the entire society. Along the way, it grabbed anything that could be used for its own purpose. Many artists stick to defining issues of contemporary life in constant expansion: time, media, economics, politics, diversity, technology.

Terry Smith emphasizes that “contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.”³² This makes up a contemporaneity consisting of not one now but many, coinciding, colliding, contemporaneities existing and moving at ever faster rates. The acceptance, even embrace, of a multitude of contemporaries is not unlike that for a multitude of truths--a mode of thinking indicative of our postmodern heritage. Along with these acceptances is the perpetual ‘anything goes’ problem.

30. Jorg Heiser, “Torture and Remedy: The End of -isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure.” In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art?* 100.

31. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

32. Smith, “Introduction,” In Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, 8-9.

All experience is mediated and all experience is readymade. Groys adds: “Given our current cultural climate the art institutions are practically the only places where we can actually step back from our own present and compare it with other historical eras. In these terms, the art context is almost irreplaceable because it is particularly well suited to critically analyze and challenge the claims of the media-driven zeitgeist...so that we can measure our own time against this historical background.”³³

But these attempts at measurement lead us further from understanding our own contemporary situation when the contents of art institutions are themselves mediated, representing the desires of a select group. So the museum is not the place to rage against the media machine. In fact, the proliferation of images and experiences make the museum and gallery only another space for more of the same. So much information in so many places leaves little space for real innovation to stand out. “But usually,” Heiser shows, “the information is too readily available and there are too many players for things *not* to find an audience—the most outrageous or unthinkable things will be accepted even if only by a relatively small group, and in this sense, rage and rejection have been replaced by a kind of generalized indifference.”³⁴ This indifference equates to ‘anything goes.’ To put it another way, Foley says, “anyone’s version of events is as good as anyone else’s....The great advantage of these approaches is that they render unnecessary the difficult business of establishing meaning and truth.”³⁵ Lack of creative space, and this generalized indifference point to the fact that given today’s technology any one of us could re-create what we see around us. This fuels the confusion of what’s to be understood as genuine or merely derivative.

33. Boris Groys, “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror.” *kein.org*. <http://roundtable.kein.org/sites/newtable.kein.org/files/GROYS_the_fate_of_art.pdf>

34. Heiser, 96.

35. Foley, *The Age of Absurdity*, 115.

2.5 Readymade

In circumstances such as these, not only is anything fair game, but everything has already been done--*fait accompli*. This makes for a situation in which invention is not the key to novelty. Following Duchamp, it is the role of artist to merely select something. "Practically everything that is done today is readymade."³⁶ Now everything is presented to the contemporary artist as a readymade object, idea, issue, etc. The world and all aspects of life are readymades awaiting selection. Anything can be art, art can be anything. This would not be a pursued avenue if the notion didn't exist that things in our world still retain value and meaning. Therefore, Baudrillard suggests, "making any object useless would be enough to make it a work of art. This is precisely what the readymade does when it merely divests an object of its function, without changing anything about it, to turn it into a museum piece. It is sufficient to make reality itself a useless function to turn it into an art object."³⁷

36. Baudrillard, 95.

37. Baudrillard, 95.

3. Art World

One crucial element of ‘contemporary art’ is the embrace of a certain ‘unified field’ in the concept of art. Beyond the de-definition of specific media, skills, and disciplines, there is some radical value in the fact that ‘the arts’ seem to have merged into a single multifarious and nomadic kind of practice that forbids any attempt at specification beyond the micro-narratives that each artist or cultural movement produces along the way. If ‘contemporary art’ refers to the confluence of a general field of activities, actions, tactics, and interventions falling under the umbrella of a single poetic matrix and within a single temporality, it is because they occupy the ruins of the ‘visual arts.’³⁸

The art world is the term used to describe the microcosm that exists around those involved with the visual arts. A rough sketch of this world is made up of primary actors: the artists, curators, critics that inhabit the institutions of the art world--the museums, galleries, non-profits, artist-run spaces, studios, and art and art history departments of teaching institutions. The art world’s secondary actors include: assistants, fabricators, designers, publishers of books and prints, installers, event planners, art writers, materials specialists, and transporters. All that work in conjunction with institutional actors including: archivists, administrators, clerks, guards, restorers, preparers, conservationists, educators, lawyers, and interns. All of these

38. Medina, “Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses,” In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art*, 19.

people work towards the goal of exhibiting works of art for the art world's audience of specialized viewers, general viewers, and collectors that, in turn, contribute to the cycle with works of their own--money, writing, more artwork, and at the least attention. This rough sketch is meant to represent the inclusive and circular movement of ideas, goods, and services within a world that mimics the larger whole of contemporary society. The art world has lately begun to be considered as one part of the culture industry encompassing everything from theme parks and Hollywood films to live music and strip clubs.³⁹ This umbrella of culture industry adds to the complexity of actors to consider, but generally any sector of the culture industry aims to provide viewers with some form of experience. The specific roles within each world of the culture industry in some way or another parallel those mentioned above and each acts as an apparatus in its own right.

The major institutions of art, the museums, commercial galleries, artist-run spaces, and non-profits are the arenas in which contemporary art discourse takes place. Artists need exhibitions and exhibiting institutions need products and experiences to fill their spaces. Curators need the institutional framework to flesh out their agendas as well. The contingency of art objects and the exclusionary attitude of the art world have led to, as Rosler explains, the "acceptance that these institutions are the proper—perhaps the only—platform for artists. A further sign of such institutionality is the emergence of a curatorial subgenre called 'new institutionalism' (borrowing a term from a wholly unrelated branch of sociology) that encompasses the work of sympathetic young curators wishing to make these 'engaged' practices intramural."⁴⁰ It is the rise in institutional reliance that has fed the pace of de-materializing artworks, the expansion of the role of the curator, and the rise of participatory

39. Umberto Eco elaborates on the culture industry as part of a manufactured reality in his essay "Travels in Hyperreality," in *Continental Aesthetics*. Ed. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) 400-410.

40. Martha Rosler, "Take the Money and Run?: Can Political and Socio-critical Art 'Survive'?" In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art?* 122-123.

experiences. Indicative of this has been, most notably, the success of artists and curators following the tenants of Nicolas Bourriaud's termed relational aesthetics--a phenomenon wholly dependent on art institutions for legitimacy.⁴¹

3.1 Art world apparatus

The art world is, in Foucault's terms, a *dispositif*--an apparatus. "The apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge."⁴² The art world, as an apparatus, supports and is supported by its functions of a monetary market and the dissemination of information specific to the arts it supports. Agamben's elaboration on the Foucauldian apparatus states, "As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge."⁴³ These power relations are manifested in the art world by its actors--namely the curators, institutional administrators, collectors, and donors. The relations of knowledge are shared amongst the various roles of artists, writers, historians, and other specialists within the art world. Agamben continues, "The term 'apparatus' designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject."⁴⁴ The production of subjects is the creation of roles. Any one subject may move between the above mentioned roles (and do frequently, every subject in the art world is always also a viewer) but the designation of the roles clearly points out that they are not without purpose. They exist for no other reason

41. I refer to Nicolas Bourriaud's, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 1998). Claire Bishop offers her critique in "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.

42. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Ed. C. Gordon. (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 196.

43. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* 3.

44. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* 11.

other than that the apparatus is “a machine that produces subjectifications, and only as such is it also a machine of governance.”⁴⁵ Agamben summarizes his definition of an apparatus as “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”⁴⁶ The art world does this by governing the “gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourse” of its subjects through their creations--works of art. Works of art are governed by their contingency.

3.2 Education

The explosion of Conceptualism in the 1960s and the subsequent teaching of concept-driven modes of creation since then have brought radical transformation to the visual arts. One’s entry into the art world will almost always begin with school. But, the ideas of technical mastery or even dedicating oneself to a single medium are passé and hardly necessary today. Multidisciplinary tracks of study and professional practice are the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, the levels of education “required” for inclusion into the serious business of art are increasing as well. A Master of Fine Arts is standard for professional artists and now universities are offering PhD programs for studio art. This trend is only increasing the levels of stratification in an art world self-governed like a pyramid scheme. Access to financial means are fundamental to an art world controlled by market forces and reliant on free time.

How does the idea that concept trumps visual appeal originate? It starts with art education. Almost half a century of conceptually and theoretically based art production has meant that several generations of artists have been educated in an academic setting saturated with this type of work. Artists

45. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* 20.

46. Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* 14.

become teachers and pass their knowledge and beliefs on with a sense of benevolence. This, Rosler claims, is what has “helped produce artists whose practices were themselves swimming in a sea of criticality and apparently anti-commodity forms.”⁴⁷ The evolution within the visual arts from visual to cognitive concerns has alienated the general public and created a more insular art world--an institutional art world.

3.3 Art Market

The rise in concept-driven, theoretical, immaterial artwork has not meant a wholesale abandonment of the art economy. On the contrary, it is market forces that dictate the movements of both capital and ideas within the art world. Smith cynically proposes how art market influence works:

Cashed-up collectors seek primacy in the list of clients of top dealers who represent the most desirable artists. Information about who is offering, who is buying, and for how much flashes around the circuit immediately. Collectors are persuaded to part with cherished items. Splashy sales also achieve instant public notoriety, not only for the house but also for those seen to be expending, so coolly, such huge sums. Art that has immediacy of appeal and the strong possibility of rapid appreciation is valued highest and bought instantly. Criticality loses its independent edge: what becomes ‘critical’ is access to the information and ability to make effective judgments within this framework. Artists join collectors and dealers in playing the same game.⁴⁸

47. Rosler, 122.

48. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 146-147.

Even the most ephemeral and immaterial presentations are accompanied by matter that is salable. Any artist that claims privilege over market forces is a fraud. One-time actions and performances are documented and this documentation itself becomes a commodity. Any work of large scale becomes salable in fragments of striated importance. To emphasize the power of money on art production, Julien Kreimer recounts:

Dave Hickey once spoke, off the cuff at an academic event, about how the high cost of shipping and insuring paintings for large shows played a big role in the rise of the sort of show in which--to paraphrase from memory--'you fly Inka over from Sweden to buy stuff in thrift stores for two weeks and make an installation.'⁴⁹

It is undeniable that capitalism influences art. Ideas of a utopian art world unsoiled by finance come and go, but arguments for a theoretical situation free of capital still persist. Rosler offers a tempered reflection: "It is this gap between the work's production and its absorption and neutralization that allows for its proper reading and ability to speak to present conditions." She reassures us that "It is not the market alone, after all, with its hordes of hucksters and advisers, and bitter critics, that determines meaning and resonance: there is also the community of artists and the potential counterpublics they implicate."⁵⁰ As long as those communities are accepting and impressed by artist's attempts, they will continue to strive for innovation. However, innovation in a larger, more inclusive art world means continued experimentation with the condition of marketability. Artists must continuously seek ways to reinvigorate the familiar.

49. Kreimer, "Painting Under Obama," 37. Dave Hickey is an American arts and culture critic known for his scathing judgement and plain language. His publications include *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press 1997), and *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012).

50. Rosler, 136.

4. Contemporary Art History

Art is what you can get away with.⁵¹

A brief history of the role of the artist illuminates several key points leading to our current situation. What we see today is the result of the impacts made from Enlightenment thinking, through the avant-garde movements, and especially the proposals of Conceptualism in the 1960s and the requisitioning of all tradition by postmodern theory. As Price implies, “The last thirty years have seen the transformation of art’s ‘expanded field.’” Today we find ourselves in a “...situation in which we’re well accustomed to conceptual interventions, to art and the social, where the impulse to merge art and life...” is the natural progression.⁵² This had hardly been the case for much of history. For centuries, the artist was either unrecognized or undifferentiated from the craftsman or artisan. There was no special place for the artist amongst producers or creators of objects with or without functional purposes. The rise of the artist as an individual can be linked to the thinking proposed by Kant of genius--something which set this individual's work apart from others. The rise of humanistic ideals and the surge of innovation and freedom drove exponential growth in the arts through the 20th century. The avant-garde movements brought change and expansion to a degree that still makes it radical today. Duchamp’s readymades and technological innovations redefined the possibilities of what an artist could do. Conceptualism, above all, redefined what an artwork could be and therefore

51. Artist Riley Robinson in conversation, 2014.

52. Price, *Dispersion*.

what an artist could be. Overall, the last century has seen a splintering and hybridization of culture and its roles--the definitions of which have continuously expanded.

4.1 End of modernism

Currently in art history the period shift into “Contemporary” is placed at around 1945,--the end of the Second World War. Around this time, Enlightenment thinking had reached its apex and the Modern age of design and technologies was in its most refined form. The whole of western culture began to accelerate. For the art world things began to change too. Many see this time as one in which the old wrestled with the new. Rosler explains that “During the postwar period...the art that seemed best equipped to carry the modernist burden was abstract painting, with its avoidance of incident in favor of formal investigations and a continued search for the sublime. In a word, it was painting by professionals, communicating in codes known only to the select few.”⁵³ This tendency of coded, insular communication would become the norm for the art world. In reaction to abstraction, artists began to look around the larger culture for inspiration. Pop art and new forms of images emerged to combat the formal constraints of abstraction and enable artists to inhabit the culture surrounding them. In reaction to this, Minimalism emerged to focus on pure form, devoid of artistic expression or critique. Then, the artist had two choices, expression of the ephemerality of culture and society or the exploration of concrete physical properties. A third mode was found by exploring ideas via conceptualizing.

53. Rosler, 114.

4.2 Conceptualism

Sianne Ngai portrays concept-driven artwork, beginning in the 1960s, as working with a “strategy of ‘perceptual withdrawal’”. She recounts that “conceptual art’s signature style was often conceived as a kind of stylelessness due to its polemic replacement of easily recognizable art-historical styles, or the look of Art, for what Kuspit called ‘the look of thought.’”⁵⁴ Instead of striving for experience of the sublime, creation of pure form, or cultural reflection as goals, artists now were dealing with the mere thoughts of these aspirations. Art, through semiology, broke down into information. Ngai confirms, “In addition to mimicking art-specific strategies of disseminating and circulating information like the poster and catalog, conceptual art became interested in all the ways in which information might be displayed.”⁵⁵ This involved an increased interest with institutional (art and otherwise) standards and practices. This interest manifested as various degrees of critique, and as the perception of institutional norms changed so did art’s reactions. The accelerated changes of thought, institutional norms, and styles helped, as Martha Buskirk reasons, “establish the possibility that an ephemeral installation, made in response to specific conditions and incorporating elements that would not be treated as art beyond that moment, might be defined as a work.”⁵⁶ This radically changed the nature of the artist’s role. No longer solely the maker of object or image, the artist now found expression of her thoughts; through these expressions (material or not) the artist aimed to influence thought. An object was no longer necessary to declare the artist’s point of view, simply the existence of the artist as a thinking being.

Enter the age of pure investigation--human thought-for-human-sake. Schirmacher acknowledges that postmodernism (beyond and intellectual or aesthetic denouncing of Modernism)

54. Sianne Ngai, “Merely Interesting,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Summer 2008) 792.

55. Ngai, “Merely Interesting,” 803.

56. Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, (Cambridge: MIT, 2003) 165.

is the signal of the end of metaphysics, the end of an era of Enlightenment endeavors. “Where it does not simply denote an intellectual fashion, post-modernism expresses the expected break with metaphysics, which has reached a definitive end.”⁵⁷ To fully grasp the significance of this, means to move beyond the production and collection of artifacts, to move beyond the significance of and importance once placed on such rarified objects. Evidence of this is the dematerialization of art.

4.3 Postmodernism

To describe art movements starting in the 1960s, including performance, conceptualism, and more ephemeral and multimedia approaches, Martha Rosler asserts that these “resisted the special material valuation of the work of art above all other elements of culture...These market-resistant forms (which were also of course casting aside the genre boundaries of Greenbergian high modernism), [had] an evasive relation to commodity and professionalization (careers),...carried forward the questioning of craft.”⁵⁸ The desires of art world patrons and the art market require art commodities to buy and sell. So, the dematerialization of the work of art has continuously been met with practical or monetary resistance. More and more frequently artworks have come to exist in perpetuity via their documentation of images and text. Even more, for artists the dematerialization of the art object “challenged isolated genius as an essential characteristic of artists and furthered the (imaginary) alignment with workers in other fields.”⁵⁹

To draw a connection between the disparate works of the exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form” (Bern Kunsthalle, 1969), Scott Burton used the term “post-studio artists.” Buskirk

57. Wolfgang Schirmacher, “The End of Metaphysics: What Does This Mean?” (1985) <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/wolfgang-schirmacher/articles/the-end-of-metaphysics-what-does-this-mean/>>

58. Rosler, 117.

59. Rosler, 118.

comments that “Expanding upon its initial application to the use of outside fabricators in the context of minimalism, Burton used the idea of post-studio production to draw connections to site-specific actions and far more disembodied conceptual propositions.”⁶⁰ And importantly, Rosler maintains that “Feminism’s far-reaching critique was quite effective in forcing all institutions...to rethink *what* and *who* an artist is and might be, what materials art might be made of, and what art *meant*.”⁶¹ A re-evaluation of the potentials for artworks simultaneously imply a re-evaluation of the role of the artist, critical response, and institutional practice.

4.4 Current shift

Unlike art-historical precedent, concept-based artwork has not precipitated a sustained reaction back to an object-based artistic practice. The current trend is that from ideas artists are moving further into the realm of immateriality through actions, performances, and temporary, site-specific installations with little intention of physical permanence. Much of this is fed by the pluralistic mantras of critical studies where the ideas of psychoanalysis and socio-anthropology trump those of artistic craft and aesthetic understanding. Claire Bishop comments that “today, political, moral, and ethical judgements have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgement in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago. This is partly because postmodernism has attacked the very notion of aesthetic judgement, and partly, because contemporary art solicits the viewer’s interaction in ever more elaborate ways.”⁶² Or as Smith puts it, “since the 1970s, relationships between contemporary artists and art museums [has shifted]. The hostility towards museums...was gradually replaced by the negotiations of institutional critique [because] curators...sought to redefine their

60. Buskirk, 133.

61. Rosler, 118.

62. Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 77-78.

role in fresh ways. Recently, as we have also seen, a convergence of interests has become the rule--or, at least, a strong model."⁶³ The curator has usurped the power art critics held in the 20th century. Anton Vidokle emphasizes that, for curators, "this increase in social significance came partly from the declining power of art criticism, with curators assuming the agency of the critic in addition to their executive power in the museum."⁶⁴ Interestingly, the art critic's popularity and social significance decreased with the rise of postmodern, wholesale cultural critique. All the while the artist has been at the mercy of either critic or curator power and taste. Therefore, the artist has sought to broaden her reach, (following larger trends) outward to other disciplines.

4.5 Contemporary criticality

Many writers and historians attempt to classify contemporary art without judgement, others do so with a critical eye. Smith follows the latter, naming three major currents he sees in contemporary art, "each of which is driven by a characteristic outlook, is drawn to specific sorts of content, uses a particular range of expressive modes, and prefers a certain system to disseminate its output."⁶⁵ First, he points out the current that has developed within the art institutions, primarily involving the top major players in the art world. This current is the institutionally sanctioned, market driver and aims to be the evidence for the writing of contemporary art history. Within this current Smith names three modes of production and/or exhibition--Retro-sensationalism, Remodernism, and Spectacularism. The first, Retro-sensationalism, is "evident in the spectacular repetitions of avant-garde shock tactics." He adds, "Retro-sensationalist art, is consumed by instantaneity, by

63. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 122.

64. Anton Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?" *eflux journal* 16 (May 2010).

65. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 7.

effects as sharp and cool as the most up-to-date fashions.”⁶⁶ Next, he labels Remodernism--which attempts to “reign in the impacts of contemporaneity on art, revive earlier initiatives, cleave new art to the old modernist impulses and imperatives, and renovate them.” And finally within this current is Spectacularism or Spectacle Art--where “both currents come together...these trends amount to the aesthetic of globalization, serving it through both a relentless remodernizing and a sporadic contemporizing of art.”⁶⁷ The whole of this first current makes up the majority of what an average art spectator sees and understands as contemporary art.

The second current Smith outlines is the post-colonial. This is the artwork made by or dealing with the existence of non-white American males. Smith writes, “No art movements here...art shaped by local, national, anticolonial, independent, antiglobalization values (those of diversity, identity, and critique). It circulates internationally through the activities of travelers, expatriates, the creation of new markets.” Thus, he adds, “It predominates in biennales.”⁶⁸ Much of this type of work derives from a fascination with, and acts as a reflection of, the multicultural world in which international artists and curators find themselves. The final current Smith describes as “the outcome of a generational change occurring as the first two have unfolded...elements of the first two currents, but with less and less regard for their fading power structures and styles of struggle, and more concern for the interactive potentialities of various material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity.”⁶⁹ This final current reads as more of a catch-all than a clearly defined mode. Smith’s description is so open-ended as to include anything. This is the global current.

66. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 197.

67. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 7.

68. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 7.

69. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 8.

Smith goes on to suggest that “Whatever mediums they favor, artists these days tend to focus on four concerns: time, place, mediation, and mood.” Let us examine the list. Smith states, “More precisely expressed, artists are raising questions as to the nature of temporality.”⁷⁰ Thereby artists are expressing time by using time. Many are focused on the concept of place: “exploring experiences of location vis-à-vis dislocation,” and here to express what is here through showing what is not here. Many concern themselves with the phenomenon of “mediation,” therefore “examining the world’s immersion in mediated interactivity”--representing mediation through itself. Even more vague, “testing the limits and the potentialities of affect in these circumstances.”⁷¹ These approaches are thinly veiled tautologies. Of course, if one is to examine time, time will be involved, something presented exists in some sense of a place. Representations of mediation are in themselves mediations. Contemporary artists, it seems, are concerned with *showing us that we are being shown something*.

It would be possible to place the work of a contemporary artist within one of the three categories Smith lays out (least of all the catch-all third) and assuming that these are the options for the contemporary artist, something must be done to set oneself apart from the pack. As Boris Groys confirms, “art and politics are connected at least in one fundamental respect: both are areas in which a struggle for recognition is being waged.”⁷² This struggle for recognition does not rest with only the artist. Luke Skrebowski asks, “How should artists/ curators/ theorists/ historians, as well as other cultural workers—in whatever hyphenated combination of roles we might usefully, which is to say tactically, concatenate—work in the present, against the present, given the current realities?”⁷³ In other words, how do actors in the art world deal with their contemporary

70. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 196.

71. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 196.

72. Groys, “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror.”

73. Luke Skrebowski, “Working against (Art) Work,” In Baldon and Lafer, *Counter-Production: Part 1*, 20.

circumstances? How does one get noticed in an over-crowded arena? These questions are valid to the point of being themes of exhibitions. The curator Sabine Folie illustrates that the exhibition Counter-Production “focuses its attention on the self-conception of artists...in order to do justice to growing demands on the individual in general and on the artistic subject in particular, so that they might redefine the role of the latter under constantly changing circumstances; they are trying to keep step precisely to be able to position themselves critically.”⁷⁴ One historical approach has been a turn to critique. Following Conceptualism, the artist has critiqued originality, the institution, and art world roles to remain original and novel. But as has been said, “criticality can often turn into seduction, and seduction, taken far enough, can also flip back into critique.”⁷⁵ Maybe critique (institutional and otherwise) has run its course. An extensive redefinition of the role of the artist is under way.

74. Sabine Folie, “Preface,” In Baldon and Lafer, *Counter-Production: Part 1*, 5.
75. Kreimer, 40.

5. Redefinition of the Artist's Role

Art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community that frantically stares at itself. Even the 'creative' act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation--the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact that he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved.⁷⁶

The contemporary artist (like all of us) is identifiable as a consumer. This has special meaning for the select groups understood to be the authors and producers. The artist, acting as a consumer, takes on the attributes of a collector. Artists act as collectors of ideas, art historical references, and fashions. So a collector here represents the artist-consumer. Agamben, (referencing Benjamin) in *Man Without Content*, acknowledges the collector as one who "'quotes' the object outside its context and in this way destroys the order inside which it finds its value and meaning."⁷⁷ This idea built by Benjamin, easily applies to the artist--most specifically to the artist's use of the readymade. Agamben again: "Whether it is a work of art or any simple commodity that he, with an arbitrary gesture, elevates to the object of his passion, the collector takes on the task of transfiguring things, suddenly depriving them both of their use value and of the ethical-social significance with which tradition had endowed them.

76. Baudrillard, 91.

77. Giorgio Agamben, *Man Without Content*, Trans. Georgia Albert. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 105.

The collector frees things from the ‘slavery of usefulness.’”⁷⁸ This act is that of selection--the power bestowed upon Duchamp through the validation of the readymade.

Any current definition of the artist must include the effect Duchamp has had on the role of the artist. Duchamp’s stunt ingrained an understanding of the artist with relation to his or her surroundings. And even more, as Okwui Enwezor makes clear this definition proposes to “delineate the supremacy of the artist: the artist is not only a form giver but also a name giver.”⁷⁹ On the foundation of concept-driven art, an artist “not only decides what the work of art is but also controls its narrative of interpretation.” Following art’s absorption of postmodern mandates, “artistic genius emerges from a subjective critique of tradition by the artist, against all other available data, not from an objective analysis of the fallacy of tradition.”⁸⁰ The selection and remaking of readymade objects has gone on for a century, during which the idea has evolved. As Buskirk agrees, “the remake of a readymade using fine-arts materials and methods, invert[s], perhaps even subvert[s], the transgressive power of Duchamp’s simple act of selecting a mass-produced object.”⁸¹ Today the act has become one of discipline and technical readymade selection. This phenomenon applies to artists and curators alike--those acting as collecting consumers.

Artists work in a manner in which they consume the roles of others and apply their practice to the fulfillment of their artistic needs. The historically understood producers of representation have themselves taken on a role of representation. In Sartre’s words, “It is a ‘representation’ for others and for myself, which means that I can be he only in *representation*.”⁸² Agamben alludes to this when he quotes Baudelaire that “every artistic

78. Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 105.

79. Enwezor, Okwui. “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition.” In Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, 211.

80. Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” 211.

81. Buskirk, 67.

82. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 102.

phenomenon is founded on the existence in the artist” of a permanent duality, the power to be at once oneself and another...the artist is artist only on condition of being double and of not ignoring any phenomenon of his double nature.”⁸³

A current has emerged when, artists seeking a way in or up have developed methods to take the techniques and processes of other fields of study, work with those techniques, and apply the results to an art context through creating works specifically for the purpose of art exhibition. As curator Folie proposes, “The question is whether it is still possible to distill from this process remnants of the inalienable, and whether in this process of blending and appropriating it is still possible to generate cultural surplus value, which has, however, long since ceased to be due solely to the work of those we traditionally call artists.”⁸⁴

5.1 Other disciplines

Roles within the art world and within the culture industry are not meaningless. Of course, hard-and-fast adherence to one and only one occupational trait is not normal either. But the purpose of self-definition within the world has legitimacy for many reasons. Specifically in the fine arts, the tendency to bridge, cross-pollinate, or investigate one's place in the world has raised flags about validity, intention, and seriousness. Why that is is beyond scope, but the feeling has been described by many. This general idea is summarized by Seth Price:

The film avant-garde, for instance, has always run on a separate track from the art world, even as its practitioners may have been pursuing analogous concerns. And while artists have always been attracted to music and its rituals, a person whose primary activity was producing music, conceived of and presented as Art, would find ‘art world’

83. Baudelaire quoted in Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 55-56.

84. Folie, “Preface,” 6.

acceptance elusive. The producer who elects to wear several hats is perceived as a crossover at best: the artist-filmmaker, as in the case of Julian Schnabel; the artist as entrepreneur, as in the case of Warhol's handling of Interview magazine and the Velvet Underground; or...artist as critic, perhaps the most tenuous position of all. This is the lake of our feeling.⁸⁵

The tendency of artists to delve into the roles of others' has historical basis. And for Kuspit, the predominate mode of thinking of the last half a century is also responsible. He suggests that "history is no longer possible in postmodernism because of modernism itself: at its most vital, it is a history of self-questioning and self-doubt, *leading artists to look far a field for their identity*." Because of this thinking, "Wherever they are seems false compared to the truth of elsewhere--of the alien, exotic, marginal--whatever one wants to call what seems outside some institutional inside."⁸⁶ Much of what is done in the art world is not so different from other professional and academic practices; for example, art journals are peer reviewed and publications are vetted. While journals and symposia are standard practice across disciplinary boundaries, there still exist core values and ethics specific to fields of study and the arts. This also points out the novelty of fine art PhD programs. Wolfgang Schirmacher makes a clear point that fundamental distinctions exist. "Demands for content, this holdover from the ontologies of substances, need not be levied; the grafted-on dialecticization of the sciences and the ineffective appeal to scientists for social responsibility can be dispensed with.

85. Price, *Dispersion*.

86. Kuspit, "The Contemporary and the Historical." (emphasis added)

Unbridled creativity is fully sufficient, needing no stimulation, for it belongs to our essential being...There is no need to spoon-feed creativity.”⁸⁷

Without direct external force, roles within the art world are shifting and artists are redefining themselves within and outside of any expectations of them. Perhaps novelty perpetuates this shift, perhaps entropy--thinking nobody is watching so ‘lets do something and see if they notice.’ Perhaps the need to stand out as an artist among other artists drives the trend; or maybe artists are following the trend of others in the art world--namely, curators.⁸⁸ Regardless of the cause, the widely recognized effect is that “the activity of making art has increasingly come to incorporate materials or methods *drawn from other disciplines*.”⁸⁹ More to the point, artists are developing ways to operate in an expanded field of contexts.

5.2 The expanded field

Writing in 1978, Rosalind Krauss laid out the proposal for understanding contemporary sculpture within an expanded field. She wrote the article, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” to deal with critical hesitations at accepting new three-dimensional artworks (earthworks, site-specific assemblages, installations, etc.) within a generally understood definition of the sculptural medium. The influential article still resonates today with regard to the propensities of contemporary artists’ proposals (and critical reluctance to accept) new forms of art as falling into any historically legitimized artistic medium or mode. It is worth including the following excerpt to be read in regards to contemporary art’s expanding field:

87. Wolfgang Schirmacher, “On the World View of a Vita Activa.” (1985) <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/wolfgang-schirmacher/articles/on-the-world-view-of-a-vita-activa/>>

88. An excellent commentary on the curator’s attempt to replace the artist is found in Vidokle, “Art Without Artists?”

89. Buskirk, 187. (emphasis added)

With regard to individual practice, it is easy to see that many of the artists in question have found themselves occupying, successively, different places within the expanded field. And though the experience of the field suggests that this continual relocation of one's energies is entirely logical, an art criticism still in the thrall of a modernist ethos has been largely suspicious of such movement, calling it eclectic. This suspicion of a career that moves continually and erratically beyond the domain of sculpture obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium). But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from another. 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.⁹⁰

Understanding medium-specificity for role-specificity we can see that the point is still very valid. Now, over thirty years later though, it could be argued that postmodernist demands (in reaction to modernist ones) have brought us to this specific point. Consider the importance when contemporary authors still raise the point. Martha Buskirk, in her book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, asks, "What might constitute a medium? To what extent does the term remain relevant? To what extent can it be connected to specific materials?" She proceeds, "Rosalind Krauss's answer, provoked by the role of photography in conceptual practices, has been to redefine the

90. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (Cambridge: MIT, 1986) 288.

idea of medium ‘as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support.’”⁹¹

Much of the debate surrounding contemporary art is centered on the notion that art is contingent on its circumstances for inclusion and validity. Much of this contingency is based, beyond medium specificity, on a huge concept of postmodern theory--context. If context is a prerequisite for understanding a given phenomenon, then it is the concern with context that has influenced the expansion of contemporary art. Buskirk writes, “The articulation of a relationship to context is part of an expanding definition of art that has enabled a hitherto unimaginable variety of often fleeting manifestations to be understood as art and presented as works of authorship. As artists have incorporated the outcome of this process of analysis [contextualization] into the structure of their work, they have directed attention both to how art is interpreted and to the significance of other cultural formations.”⁹² It is these other cultural formations (those found outside of the traditional parameters of the art world) that are influencing the actions of artists today.

Following the exhaustion of institutional critique as a means to demarcate ethical and practical boundaries, more and more artists are finding ways to exceed the boundaries of the institutions altogether--in presentation anyway. Buskirk again, “The opportunities thus established to step outside the museum and gallery context have presented artists with the possibility of using highly varied strategies of intervention to interact with cultural situations.”⁹³ Thereby artists are finding new ways and means of recontextualizing their surroundings both in and out of the art world. One way of doing this, Buskirk concedes, is through physical recontextualization--the act of presenting

91. Buskirk, 151. Quoting Rosalind Krauss “Reinventing the Medium.” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 289-305.

92. Buskirk, 208.

93. Buskirk, 198.

“work outside the context of an established exhibition space...the presentation of *readymades* in their typical habitat, without the benefit of an obvious act of physical recontextualization to draw attention to their status as such.”⁹⁴ This sort of action simultaneously pushes the boundaries into culture at large and casts a net over the whole of culture to become included within the realm of art. Aside from reliance on outside culture to reinvigorate the artists’ collection of readymades, artists find materials surrounding them in the form of the artwork of their peers. Much of what is mined has been taught as art history and is therefore significant to the context of the work artists currently propose. In late-postmodern fashion, artists have relied on an “intense engagement with context...often involving the creation of works that incorporate a precise response to other works, both earlier and contemporary.”⁹⁵ This approach does however use the means of academic research to validate its ends--through “both a thorough analysis of the circumstances of context and...by the mechanisms of reference and quotation.”⁹⁶ Appropriation too, the key to Pop Art, hip-hop, and the cause of lawsuits has been gentrified further under the guise of quotation.

In order to further the expansion of the field of artist’s role it is necessary to involve others. Various forms of participation, performance, and collaboration are standard now. These approaches create space for further inclusion and breath life into the artists’ tactics in question. A sense of urgency surrounds the trend toward more inclusion, specifically inclusion from outside the understood boundaries of art reference. Nikos Papastergiadis ties this urgency to none other than the simple desire to stay contemporary. He comments, “The coda for the contemporary artist is now defined by the desire to be *in* the contemporary, rather than to produce a belated or elevated response to the everyday. To be in the place of the here and now,... to see the realization of work in the experience of connection...to raise the

94. Buskirk, 200.

95. Buskirk, 182.

96. Buskirk, 182.

value of...the 'performative' aspect of practice."⁹⁷ Papastergiadis goes on to say, "Artists stretch the boundaries of their practice by defining their context and strategies in paradoxes. Museums without walls. Cities as laboratories. Living archives. Walking narratives. These slogans are now common in the art world."⁹⁸ Artists cast a net of art around technology, situations, and participation.

But the current obsession with participation creates a spectator out of the artist—one of many participants. The democratization of roles and the recontextualization of all others delimits artistic possibilities while it alienates the central actor. As Agamben notes, "in this alienation he owns himself, and in owning himself he alienates himself."⁹⁹ The expansion of the field is possibly limitless. But without limits, all becomes neutral. For Agamben, "The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on the side of himself."¹⁰⁰

5.3 Context

The painter, Al Held, famously quipped that "all conceptual art is just pointing at things." The sentiment has never been more true than today. Artists have historically thrived on appropriation of content; now artists look to benefit from the appropriation of context. Contemporary artists seek their subject matter and inspiration from a massive collection of human history, the ever-changing past and present circumstances, and the Internet's bottomless well of information. Simultaneously, within the art world the idea of a brand new idea or construction has waned.

97. Nikos Papastergiadis, "Spatial Aesthetics: Rethinking the Contemporary." In Smith et al., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, 363.

98. Papastergiadis, 364.

99. Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 48.

100. Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 55.

No longer do artists seek to invent as much as to redefine, re-investigate, and recontextualize. The approach of recontextualization involves more than redefinition or investigation, it derives from half a century of post-structural and psychoanalytic thought in order to deconstruct what exists--more often than not, to better suit the needs of the artist. The approach involves *everything*. Is this all that is left to do? Jorg Heiser states the “the perversely hybrid nature of today’s cultural and political landscape has had an effect on the tendency of art to settle into one aspect of the triad of production, distribution, and consumption.”¹⁰¹ The art world, like the world as a whole feeds off of the cyclical nature of production and consumption. It seems artists are increasingly interested in recycling too--ideas and images, that is. But reuse, recycle, and re-context also applies to the art world’s colonization of other branches of learning and practice as well. According to Hal Foster, “the artist, critic, or historian projects his or her practice onto the field of the other, where it is read not only as authentically indigenous but as innovatively political!”¹⁰²

5.4 Historical misreadings

“History is an attempt to find consistency in--to read consistency into--the inconsistent contemporary. Replacing the healthy flexibility of the contemporary with the rigidity of history is an attempt to channel creativity in a certain direction and finally to control and even censor it.”¹⁰³ So claims Donald Kuspit; his assessment is valid for art history and artists’ propensity to appropriate and remix. Kuspit’s statement is based on a mistrust of history; but mistrust does not equate abuse or ignorance. Artists now seek to “channel creativity in a certain

101. Heiser, 100.

102. Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 307.

103. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

direction” by basing their own practice on the roles and techniques historically benefiting others. An ignorance of a discipline does not warrant “control” of it and even less to “censor it.” But this is the direction of those who dabble. An attempt to appropriate another’s history amounts to little more than a misreading of it. To be clear, the writing of history (the role of the art historian), the selection and presentation of historical artifacts (the role of the curator), and the creation of such artifacts (the role of the artist) is presently defined as a perpetual, self-serving recontextualization.

6. Art-noun

Thus art is led to query the radicalism of its powers, to devote its operations to more modest tasks. It aims to play with the forms and products of imagery, rather than carry out their demystification.¹⁰⁴

It has been pointed out that art directs us to nothing; that the artist is without content; and that the whole world is up for the taking. Art, being representation, is more closely aligned with theater than reality. But, it is the realm of make-believe pretending to not play. Unfortunately, the belief that art can lead us to truths (demystification) still exists, and some within the arts take this assumption as a mandate. For many artists today, the process involves the demystification not of images but of practices--via role appropriation. The painter Julien Kreimer provides an excellent example to illustrate this phenomenon:

A corollary painting problem is illustrated by the concept of the art band. Members of an art band play instruments but are not necessarily 'musicians,' and they realize that a lot of what makes music look interesting is not the actual music itself but everything else: the look, the energy, the accoutrements. What the art band has going for it is this awareness of all the things that exist outside the making of actual music. Presumably, many musicians in non-art bands liked the 'everything else' at a tender age, too. But then they learned to play the music. They were faced the complexity

104. Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, Trans. Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso, 2007) 25.

of training, and then they reintroduced the haircut, the clothes, the sneer, and whatever other props made sense around the music they were playing. The art band skips the years-of-training part, and the inevitable reckoning with failure that those years imply...What we do, in the art world, is not always so far removed from this. The art world's ubiquitous panel discussions often feel like art panels: a bunch of artists pretending to do the things that people do on a panel, like making emphatic points and disagreeing with one another, but actually finding themselves more intrigued by the rows of mics and water bottles, the tablecloth and the nameplates.¹⁰⁵

6.1 Definition

Kreimer succinctly defines the artist's tendency of role appropriation as such: "*So perhaps we can call this practice (art band, art novel, art lab, etc.) 'art-noun': the appropriation by artists of activities from another field, performed independently of the evaluative criteria operative within that field.*"¹⁰⁶

It is recognized that every aspect of life fuels artistic endeavors. The question then is whether or not complete enclosure is possible in good faith; and whether or not the intentions of the artist are to pretend or to deceive. Price acknowledges, "The last hundred years of work indicate that it's demonstrably impossible to destroy or dematerialize Art, which, like it or not, can only gradually expand, voraciously synthesizing every aspect of life."¹⁰⁷ Art can, and will, "art-everything." So, malicious intent of the artist would be performing the activities from another field without its evaluative criteria. Artists assume roles disguised as others yet retain their status of an artist. The situation is likened to

105. Kreimer, 40.

106. Kreimer, 40. (emphasis added)

107. Price, *Dispersion*.

Lyotard's statement on the author's use of language: "Undisciplined vocables laden with myriad meanings that are sometimes contradictory or unknown, placed in syntaxes replete with innuendos, mispronunciations, ambiguities: everything in linguistic material leads honest intention to signify astray and betrays loyalty to meaning."¹⁰⁸ Simultaneously, as Baudrillard affirms, "Virtuality tends towards perfect illusion. It brings the play of illusion to an end through the perfection of reproduction, the virtual reissuing the real."¹⁰⁹ The copy becomes the original; the fictional becomes the actual.

Artists are increasingly looking outward to other disciplines in order to examine the circumstances in which they find themselves. The art-noun trend applies through the commandeering of roles and techniques of the liberal arts and sciences. Specifically, artists are assuming the roles of art historians, anthropologists, and archivists in an effort to approach their own practices through the criticality of those disciplines. However well-intentioned, well-versed, and well-equipped the artist may be, the fact remains that pride, vanity, and bad faith underlie the desire to expand and experiment. As Hal Foster once stated, "a kind of ethnographer-envy consumes artists."¹¹⁰ At the root of these ventures into other fields of study and culture, the artist strives to complete the task *as an artist*. If not, then why not abandon the title of artist all together? Because today the only prerequisite to be an artist is to exist.

108. Lyotard, 30.

109. Baudrillard, 114.

110. Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 305.

6.2 Art-scientist

Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. The Platonic proscription of the poets is based on the impossibility of doing two things at once prior to being based on the immoral content of fables.¹¹¹

Art and science have a long history, with both disciplines working at times in conjunction and others in opposition. There is great evidence of artists’ fascination with physical science. For that reason, the role of the art-scientist is one in which artists increasingly use the tools and style of science in their art. Many art forms throughout the 20th century relied heavily on scientific and technological breakthroughs. Notably, the inventions of photography, recorded film and sound, and later video brought about their own medium genres in the arts. It is impossible to know the effect electricity and lighting has had on the development of artistic mediums. Any artistic endeavor is reliant on some scientific innovation. Scientific methodologies have also held sway in the arts--giving rise to formulaic methods of preparation and analysis. The theoretical framework of the sciences has influenced the reliance on theory within visual art. But for the sake of the artistic role assumed of art-scientist, it is the aesthetics and methodologies of science that hold prominence.

111. Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics* Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. (New York: Continuum, 2004) 13.

To begin, one reflection of Jean Baudrillard's reads that, as opposed to science, "Art is never the mechanical reflection of the positive or negative conditions of the world, it is its exacerbated illusion, its hyperbolic mirror. In a world devoted to indifference, art can only add to this indifference."¹¹² Artists that seek objectivity in their work seek a form of distance scientists are assumed to have for theirs. This is the stereotype of cold sterility sought by photographers and film makers and exemplified by Judd's minimal, cold, hard-edged structures. Ngai, examining conceptual art beginning in the 1960s, observes that "conceptual art became interested in all the ways in which information might be displayed. As it thus made use of charts, specimen cases, and reference manuals to pursue its resemblance to the science fair project, boardroom presentation, or information booth, over the decade the look of merely interesting conceptual art would evolve into the look of public exhibition as such."¹¹³ The look of science is what artists have been after. The influence of unrestricted information has not weakened. Kreimer summarizes this fascination of contemporary art:

And all the art labs, those installations with charts, papers, drawers, and test tubes, borrow the look of a lab without tackling the things that makes a lab interesting--namely the scientific principle, the verifiability of results, and the idea of propositions tested for truth or falsehood. After all, what is being verified when colored water/gas/whatever gets pumped around a bunch of plants/ Plexiglas boxes/whatever to help things grow/die/whatever (eg. Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca*, 2000)? Is anyone learning anything?¹¹⁴

112. Baudrillard, 115.

113. Ngai, "Merely Interesting," 803.

114. Kreimer, 40.

Again, artists use the look, the methods, the techniques of another field to represent what that field's productions might look like. Mimicking the look of experimentation is not experimentation.

Contemporary artists are influenced by the contemporary fascination with biological modification. The lab-grown chimera of the future will probably look like an art student design project and less like the mythical beast. This fascination led artist Eduardo Kac, working with geneticists, to create a glowing green bunny, *Alba* in 2000. This was less than a scientific breakthrough. Scientists have been studying and modifying green fluorescent proteins (GFP) since the 1970s.¹¹⁵ As Buskirk implies about artist Mark Dion, "The various roles Dion has taken on—explorer, naturalist, archaeologist—consciously hark back to an earlier period in the history of scientific exploration, when areas of expertise were less narrowly defined and scientific inquiry might be conducted by the same wealthy amateurs who avidly collected its material evidence."¹¹⁶ Perhaps the assumption of new roles marks a new time for contemporary art. A time when an individual is not clearly defined by his or her professional title. Perhaps all artists, critics, and curators are re-becoming 'amateurs who avidly collect.'

115. An example is the work of Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey whose works include a whale skeleton encrusted with a chemical growth of alum crystals and images and installations made of growing grass.

116. Buskirk, 187.

6.3 Art-archivist

They will come against us, our successors, will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odor of our decaying minds, which will have already been promised to the literary catacombs.

But we won't be there... At last they'll find us—one winter's night—in open country, beneath a sad roof drummed by a monotonous rain. They'll see us crouched beside our trembling aeroplanes in the act of warming our hands at the poor little blaze that our books of today will give out when they take fire from the flight of our images.

They'll storm around us, panting with scorn and anguish, and all of them, exasperated by our proud daring, will hurtle to kill us, driven by a hatred the more implacable the more their hearts will be drunk with love and admiration for us.¹¹⁷

The institutional practices of building and maintaining collections, collection display, and archival research have been taken on by artists to create their works. So the procedures and techniques used on artists' works are now those used by the artist in their works produced. Part of this trend may lie in the proliferation of information and images at our disposal. Ever increasing data storage and the Internet's seemingly infinite nature means an endless potential for virtual mining, collating, and exploration. The never ending supplies of goods and the

117. F. Filippo T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism." Original 1909. In *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 149.

continuous building of spaces to store these things means that we should never be without enough physical material to manage as well. We have all become archivists of a sort, artists as well.

The International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) Project's definition of an archive: "The whole of the records of a creator. An agency or institution responsible for the preservation and communication of records selected for permanent preservation. A place in which records selected for permanent preservation are kept."¹¹⁸ An archive is a collection with a purpose. The preservation of information in an archive serves a useful function. For historians and researchers, the archive is firsthand source material. For the artist, the archive acts as both source material and a record of their own work, and for some, the archive serves as a model for the work they produce.

Explaining the importance of archives today, Seth Price has pointed out, "The notion of a mass archive is relatively new, and a notion which is probably philosophically opposed to the traditional understanding of what an archive is and how it functions."¹¹⁹ "But what if," Heiser asks, "that archive becomes so vast that it can't be held in check, if it extends beyond any single human being's capacity?" He responds, "Artistic innovation, it seems, can only be taken forward if it's not so much about finding that one tiny *thing* that hasn't entered the archive of cultural knowledge yet, but about finding an innovative way of making use of that archive, or of settling into its cracks and uncharted assets."¹²⁰ Perhaps this is the impetus for artists to assume the role of archivists--to find innovative ways to use archives? Perhaps after the fact.

118. International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems. *inter pares.org* InterPARES Glossary (2001). <http://interpares.org/display_file.cfm?doc=ip1_glossary.pdf>.

119. Price, *Dispersion*.

120. Heiser, 96.

But Heiser continues, “Innovation for a long time probably relied as much on information as it did on ignorance, or rather the luck of overlooking the right things. It’s become rather hard not to be relatively well-informed in a field when, via the Internet and growing archives, almost everything is available at hand.”¹²¹ There is too much information, too much stuff and we can all get to it. There is then an appeal, an aesthetic sensibility, to stripping down the profusion and presenting something in a manner reminiscent of surprise and wonder. This is contrary to the indifference and irony of our times. Artists must employ their sense of ironic indifference to make their work appear contemporary.¹²² Perhaps the art-archivist tendency is in competition with real archivists. Again, as Foster said in describing artists’ fascinations with all things ethnographic, they work to “outhistorian the historians”¹²³ The trend is not necessarily new. The appropriation of the role and the tools and techniques of another’s field of study is the logical art-historical progression.

Donald Kuspit, writing about history, argues that the subject of the writing becomes “a fetishized product, as though the creative process that brought it into being is beside its point. In fact, the process is completed by its creative *interpretation*, which is ongoing--a perpetual re-becoming and thus de-reification and dis-establishing of the art product. Only when there is nothing left to interpret and communicate is the object complete... art history is subliminally concerned with the legitimacy of objects, and only reified objects are legitimate from the perspective of history. History writing, then, is necessarily an act of reification, and reification goes hand in hand with idolization--the antithesis of critical consciousness.”¹²⁴ Therefore, the artistic practice of doing the

121. Heiser, 96.

122. An example is the work of Jon Rafman. His ongoing project, *9-Eyes*, is a website filled with images taken by the Google Street View car. <<http://www.9-eyes.com>>

123. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” 305.

124. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

same with found materials and information is doing the work of art history. The artist working as an archivist, as a historian, is merely re-legitimizing objects and information they have become interested with. Often, it is the outlying, or overlooked aspects of collected detritus that interests artists the most. They work around the periphery, poke into the cracks of an area that has been ignored as insignificant. In other cases, artists search out the types of information important to art history, but not necessarily art objects. Buskirk suggests that “with the increasing attention to all aspects of institutional practices, however, such art-historical tools have become the focus.” for artists.¹²⁵ This trend reads as a continuation of certain forms of institutional critique developed in the last century, for instance, Hans Haacke’s *Manet-PROJEKT '74* (1974) and *Shapolski et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* (1971). His focus was to expose an institution’s finance through its own collection, and as a historian, through its own devices. Buskirk specifically states, “A work’s provenance is an important tool in confirming the authenticity of a work, even though it is often viewed as unconnected to a work’s meaning except with respect to the initial circumstances of a commissioned piece, or when the physical contours of the work have been altered by its passage through different hands.”¹²⁶ For Hans Haacke, this was the information needed to make a poignant strike at unseen institutional frameworks. Haacke’s work employs the methods of archivists and historians and, to a point, takes on the feel of an institutional presentation, but ultimately (eventually) finds itself exhibited in the museum’s galleries because Haacke’s actions are performed *as an artist*.

A more literal example of using the institutional style is Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* (1999). Dion’s is an object in the form of a natural history museum display or a cabinet of curiosity filled with items—mostly garbage found along the banks of the River Thames in front of the museum at low tide. Dion’s Wunderkammer uses classification and filing of objects

125. Buskirk, 168.

126. Buskirk, 168.

in an encyclopedic manner with a designer's touch. Dion's approach is reliant on the style (and our recognition of it) to make his approach valid--that one could fill a box that looks like something in a museum with anything and it looks like something in a museum. Buskirk, again emphasizing the contingency of Dion's approach, asserts that "As artists have made both the art museum itself and its relation to other collection types a focus of attention, however, the activity of making art has increasingly come to incorporate materials or methods drawn from other disciplines."¹²⁷ "It is thus as an artist that Mark Dion went collecting insects in Venezuela, observed the wildlife in the rain forests of Brazil, embarked on a study of the endangered species of Belize, and excavated sites in Europe and the United States."¹²⁸ Dion's multidisciplinary approach is not necessarily new. It has only been in reaction to the divisions of fields of study over the last two centuries or so that this has become anomalous. But in the end, Mark Dion's creations find homes in museum collections because he has created them *as an artist*.

Ultimately, according to Jacques Ranciere, the fascination with collecting and re-representing objects and ideas of the past is not left to one discipline or another. This fascination is indicative of something else: "the contemporary ebb and flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia."¹²⁹ This nostalgia is the symptom of a general thinking about contemporaneity that mourns for everything. The realm of current aesthetics, he declares, is "the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning."¹³⁰ Perhaps contemporary critical thinking and aesthetics has, following its subject of study, devolved into nothing more than reaction to the present. Artists no longer use only the style of the art institution to critique it; they have turned their attention to fully absorbing

127. Buskirk, 187.

128. Buskirk, 186.

129. Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.

130. Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9.

the techniques of the institutions in order to fit their work within them. It is not without the art institutions--and especially their archives--that often the work of artists becomes legitimized, rarefied, and part of a larger art historical canon. Without the presentation within the institutions of fine art, these objects would not appear as works of art. It is precisely the archival, preservationist nature of art institutions that make their works accessible. Or, you can just find them on the internet.

6.4 Art-anthropologist

Until quite recently, we could to some extent trust intuition: we knew the difference between a merely folkloristic, superficial demonstration of eclectic pastiche or multicultural harmony, and an actual cross-fertilization of different strands of cultural tradition. It becomes apparent in gesture, in the details of pronunciation, in the actual knowledge.¹³¹

A prolific trend in contemporary art could be labeled as art-anthropology; artwork made by artists acting as anthropologists. This category includes artists that pursue artwork as social activists, documentarians, and cultural anthropologists. The pseudo-ethnographic representation of another's (or one's own) culture is symptomatic of the art-anthropologist. All forms of art-as-political demonstration and art-as-social critique fall into this category. Foster lays out an extensive critique of the development of this mode of art making in his essay "The Artist as Ethnographer?" in which he argues, "art thus passed into the expanded field of culture that anthropology is thought to survey."¹³²

Why anthropology? What is it that makes this branch of human science so appealing to artists today? Foster offers the following answers. "First," he argues, "anthropology is prized as the science of *alterity*; in this regard it is second only to psychoanalysis as a lingua franca in artistic practice and critical discourse alike. Second, it is the discipline that takes *culture* as its object, and it is this expanded field of reference that post-

131. Heiser, 97.

132. Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?" 306.

modernist art and criticism have long sought to make their own.”¹³³ Anthropology is popular because it deals with differences, and art craves novelty. Also, anthropology is a readymade field of study for contemporary art. “Third,” Foster resumes, “ethnography is considered *contextual*, the rote demand for which contemporary artists share with many other practitioners today, some of whom aspire to fieldwork in the everyday.” And as has been noted, recontextualization is key for the production and explanation of contemporary art. Fourth on Foster’s list, “anthropology is thought to arbitrate the *interdisciplinary*, another rote value in contemporary art and theory. Finally, fifth, it is the *self-critique* of anthropology that renders it so attractive...For all these reasons rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status today.”¹³⁴ The field of anthropology offers a complete toolkit to artists aware of the fact that to do any thing new they must look outward to others. Comparatively, artists have used the tools of anthropology as an excuse to examine and re-represent their personal ethnicity.

The role of the art-anthropologist, like the art-archivist, is marked by what Ranciere calls an aesthetic nostalgia or mourning. The installation as a device can be, in Ranciere’s words, “transformed into a theatre of memory and make the artist a collector, archivist or window-dresser, placing before the visitor’s eyes not so much a critical clash of heterogeneous elements as a set of testimonies about a shared history of the world.”¹³⁵ The examination of an element of shared history is the primary operation of the art-anthropologist under the guise of disinterestedness.

Most often the approach of the art-anthropologist is to document some phenomenon, to capture it, and re-present it with varying degrees of manipulation. As Smith notes, “We know, instantly, that the documentary mode is necessarily that of a

133. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” 305.

134. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” 305.

135. Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, 25.

Western technology, in this case in the service of an anthropological gaze.”¹³⁶ The documentary mode, being Western as Smith says, can never be as objective as any artist tries to profess. The art-anthropologist fools himself if the belief is contrary. Foster confirms this: “Often this realist assumption is compounded by a *primitivist fantasy*: that the other has access to primal psychic and social processes from which the white (petit) bourgeois subject is blocked.”¹³⁷

The art-anthropologist, through mere documentation, seeks to reveal something hidden from cultural consciousness. This aim is short when that to be revealed is only hidden to some--the white, petit bourgeois art world. But the intention to reach out, explore, and reveal culture is paramount to the art-anthropologist. Through these acts they aim to bridge a gap, connect to others, but it is unavoidable that this is no more than a representation of a connection. Foster explains it this way: “The quasi-anthropological artist today may seek to work with sited communities with the best motives of political engagement and institutional transgression, only in part to have this work recorded by its sponsors as social outreach, economic development, public relations...or art.”¹³⁸ Any attempt is thwarted by art institutional collusion because that is ultimately the end goal.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the attempt to capture and disseminate the immediacy of a social, political, or cultural situation is not very successful in an art context. Reasonably, a delay exists between this capture and its exposition. Therefore Buskirk agrees, “So we have works that are about immediacy of experience accomplished through the direct presence of body, but an immediacy that has to be imagined through the mediation of accounts and documents.”¹⁴⁰ These accounts and documents often amount to sophisticated travelogues. The art-

136. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 179.

137. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” 303.

138. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer?” 303.

139. For example, Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*, sited in the Forest Houses project in the South Bronx, NY, in 2013 and financed by the Dia Art foundation.

140. Buskirk, 223.

anthropologist, attempts to arrest (or play with) the fleeting nature of their personal experience by representing their multifaceted exchanges through a collection of photographs, some documents, or a video accompanied by the artist's verbal descriptions of the experience.

One example of the art-anthropologist at work is Paul Chan's post-Katrina *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007), commissioned by Creative Time, New York. Anton Vidokle sums up Chan's production in this way:

...what passed largely unnoticed...was Chan's peculiar positioning of the artist in relation to the work: he did not write the play, direct it, or act in it. The set was essentially a city street. Chan's artistic involvement consisted largely of spending many months teaching as a volunteer in a local college, building close relationships with local community groups and grassroots organizations--in other words, creating the conditions necessary for the production and reception of the play, while ensuring that part of the money raised for the project would go to local needs other than culture.¹⁴¹

Chan's project is an example of what could be called the art-anthropological high road. Chan sought to generate effective change for the community, and limited his involvement to such. But then, why is it that his name will forever be attached to the play--the product? Because the total of the actions were performed as a work of art, by Chan, working *as an artist*.

More problematic are the phenomena of self-examination through anthropology and the art-intellectualization of cultural situations. One example is the work of Dor Guez, an Orthodox Christian, homosexual Israeli. He exists as a minority within a minority; his body of work explores the difficulties and

141. Vidokle, "Art Without Artists?"

peculiarities of his personal situation. Through photography, found archive material, and video he demonstrates the daily lives of his family and aspects of his personal history. Problems arise though as these personal stories are mediated through the artist. Images that bear physical damage are shown with those he has manipulated to look damaged. The supposed authenticity of his intention is lost through video editing and image preparation. Conversely, recontextualization for an art audience of white Americans means that his personal ethnicity becomes a peep show for the merely curious. Nothing is taught, nothing is learned. Guez, and so many artists like him, use anthropology as a means to generate images--images of nostalgia and mourning. And these images are validated as the *work of an artist*. Brian Holmes calls this commodified culture. He reasons, "identity formations are encouraged as stylistic resources for commodified cultural production, with the effect of deflecting the issues away from social antagonism." He continues that "the mollifying discourses of late cultural studies, with their focus on the entertainment media, could provide an excellent distraction from the kind of serious conflict that began to emerge in American universities in the early 1990s, when a movement arose to make narratives of minority emancipation...a part of the so-called 'literary canon.'" More troubling though are the effects that media and cultural intellectualization have on those that would wish to exploit them. Holmes explains that commercial media exploits using its vast resources: "regional cultures and subcultures are sampled, recoded into product form, and fed back to their original creators via the immeasurably wider and more profitable world market."¹⁴² In the global market (which surrounds the art world) one cannot expect to find an authentic ethnic representation, a fact the art-anthropologist (as producer and consumer of commercial media) at once mourns and celebrate.

142. Holmes, "The Flexible Personality." European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, *eipcp.net*. 2002.

6.5 Art-social activist

It is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer *tout court* is a democratic act, for every art work--even the most 'open-ended'-- determines in advance the depth of participation that the viewer may have with it.¹⁴³

As does an art-anthropologist, the art-social activist works within culture to explore its political aspects. Expectedly, art-social activism is characterized by action and performance. Many of the proponents of art-social activism and art-politics insist that the modes of its execution are fundamentally valid in contemporary culture. This belief is based on the dematerialization of the art object, leaving action and the residue of such as the most pertinent to express the contemporary lineage of post-studio, ephemeral conceptualism. Interaction and contingency are key to art-social activism. This mode of art making, reliant on performance and interaction is heavily influenced by French critic Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas laid out in his book *Relational Aesthetics*. Clair Bishop argues that "Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, to Bourriaud (and practitioners of relational art) an art object is not as socially effective as an action.

143. Bishop, 78.

144. Bishop, 54.

There is historical precedent for this mode of working. Certainly, artists have been making works with political agendas for centuries. But as noted before, critical studies and concept-driven production have directly fed this type of work for the most recent decades. Martha Rosler declares that: "The term 'political art' reappeared after art world commentators used it to ghettoize work in the 1970s, with some hoping to grant such work a modicum of respectability while others wielded it dismissively, but for the most part its valence was drifting toward positive. Even better were other, better-behaved forms of 'criticality,' such as the nicely bureaucratic-sounding 'institutional critique' and the slightly more ominous 'interventionism.'"¹⁴⁵

Today, every artist considers their work an intervention. Everything they propose is a critique of something--institutional, social, or otherwise. And yes, some political art has substance and some actions do affect change. As Rosler admits, "Young people, as the hoary cliché has it, often have idealistic responses to received orthodoxy about humanity and wish to repair the world, while some artists too have direct experience of poverty and social negativity and may wish to elevate others--a matter of social justice."¹⁴⁶ Some artists are working for social change based on their own or perceived experience, but by and large, students are repeating what they have been taught. And for the past two decades or more, artists have been taught that art equates activism and that any form of action can be art. Rosler again, "There are always artworks, or art 'actions,' that are situated outside the art world or that 'cross-list' themselves in and outside the golden ghettos...There is so far no end to art that adopts a critical stance."¹⁴⁷

145. Rosler, 122-123.

146. Rosler, 135.

147. Rosler, 136.

A specific example of this type of “cross-listed” action is Mary Ellen Carroll’s *prototype 180*--from Carroll’s project website:

prototype 180 is an urban alteration that entails a radical form of renovation through the physical rotation and reoccupation of a single family house in the aging, first ring subdivision of Sharpstown in Houston, Texas. In conception and planning for over 10 years, the project is temporally, physically, and structurally organized around its catalytic rotational transformation. While the rotation and relocation of the house on its lot interrupt the relation of the house to its context and to existing street typologies they also signal the altered life of the house as a space devoted to a program that will address the issue of aging first ring suburbs and their futures. prototype 180 strategically intersects conceptual art, social activism, urban legislation and economic processes.¹⁴⁸

In planning since 1999, the house was rotated and reset in 2010. The house was put onto a house moving truck, driven off, and the truck backed up in the street and back onto the lot in the opposite direction. Exhibition of the work consists of a two-channel video, plans, and documents about the house and the project. But Carroll is not a young graduate--she has been an artist for over twenty years. Again, the action has only found traction because Carroll has undertaken it *as an artist*. The artwork, the act of rotating a house is meant, according to Diana Baldon, to highlight the “city’s absence of land-use policies.”¹⁴⁹ The absence of land-use policy calls for a project to exploit that lack of policy? Ridiculous. This is as useless as striving for celebrity status to highlight the negative impact of celebrity culture.

148. Mary Ellen Carroll, *Prototype 180*. 2011. <<http://www.prototype180.com/>>.

149. Diana Baldon, “Rehabilitating Counter-Production,” In Baldon and Lafer, *Counter-Production: Part 1*, 12-13.

Hu Fang, writing about the future of inter-relational practice, observes that it exists “along a blurry border between reality and fantasy, and will disappear over the horizon just as life will...Such creativity shall and will continuously raise questions with regard to social life and stimulate our consciousness of life in general, as well as our actions.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, art-social activists continue to blur the line between what is art and what is everyday action. To quote Ranciere, “Knowing whether these ‘substitutions’ can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them is without doubt an important question of our present.”¹⁵¹ The number of artists working in this mode is only increasing. The proliferation of performance and furthered acceptance of everyday-based actions means looking further into these “substitutions” is imperative lest the visual arts continue to devolve into mere theater and prop comedy.

150. Hu Fang, “New Species of Spaces,” In Aranda et al., *What is Contemporary Art?* 78.

151. Ranciere, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Trans. Steven Corcoran. (Cambridge: Polity, 2009) 60.

7. Conclusion

And as long as nihilism secretly governs the course of Western history, art will not come out of its interminable twilight.

Must I consult art to understand that identity is administered, power exploits, resistance is predetermined, all is shit?¹⁵²

7.1 Historical self-comparison

Contemporary artists exist in a time in which they can no longer live up to the values historically bestowed upon them. Neither can the imposition of art history nor aesthetic values deter the devolution of contemporary art into another form of social media, the repetition of historical forms, or aestheticized everyday life. Contemporary art exists in a time which, as Baudrillard articulates, has “surpassed disappearance, ...surpassed simulation, surpassed in the sense of an irreversible coma.”¹⁵³ Contemporary art exists in the aftermath of the grand modernist projects of the last century.

152. Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 58.
Price, *Dispersion*.

153. Baudrillard, 107.

Given that, Terry Smith asserts, “After the era of grand narratives, they [contemporary practices] may be all that there is. Indeed--who knows?--aftermath may last forever.”¹⁵⁴

Contemporary artists rely on historical referents for justification for their actions and creations. In this sense, the artist is always reactionary. Historically, these reactions were woven into a narrative called art history; today, these actions exist in that history’s aftermath. What Donald Kuspit calls a “perpetually contemporary unsolvable puzzle.”¹⁵⁵ The art-historical trajectory will not be found in an attempt to define the contemporary. Contemporary art is made up of all particularities--each a singularity, none universal. A complete study cannot be formed out of anecdotal evidence. Therefore, as Kuspit states, each artwork, action, and interpretation is contingent “in the context of the observer-interpreter’s phenomenological articulation of his or her complex experience of it.”¹⁵⁶

“Accordingly,” Boris Groys reports, “we now witness repeated waves of nostalgia for a time when individual works of art were still revered as precious, singular masterpieces.”¹⁵⁷ For better or worse, each singularity has a historical referent in which to compare itself. Contemporary works of art are documents of this self-comparison; they exist *as evidence of their own existence*. The artwork’s representation of itself is the artist’s only claim to historical validity. The only tangible evidence of an artwork’s value is simply that it exists.

154. Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* 6.

155. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

156. Kuspit, “The Contemporary and the Historical.”

157. Groys, “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror.”

7.2 Within the expanded field

Contemporary art operates within an expanded field. Experimentation, appropriation, and the acceptance of such have brought art to a point where any attempt at novelty implies a further expansion beyond the understood confines of mediums, techniques or roles. Like Hawking's universe, following a great explosion, the realm of the arts will continue to expand until it pulls itself completely apart. This constant movement implies constant change, hence the importance of ephemerality in the contemporary. The furthered acceptance of anything and everything into the field of art gives the whole a specious appearance.

Again, Rosalind Krauss's assertions on sculpture in the 1970s anticipated this endless expansion. Her rumination on medium-specificity frames language used today in which ephemerality, failure, light, time, questions, etc., are declared artistic mediums. Accepting this modification is as essential to critique as accepting installation as a form of sculpture was to Krauss. As Martha Buskirk furthers, "to ignore their implications would not just alter but destroy the work. Thus they go to the heart of questions about where the work actually resides along a continuum of possibilities."¹⁵⁸ This continuum is not a prerequisite, but an axial measure along lines of contingency-independence and of self-historical reference.

158. Buskirk, 154.

7.3 Recontextualization

Contemporary artists are subject to and rely on contemporaneity's chaos. Points of departure are found in flux and rupture. A profusion of information creates ambiguity and confusion. Nothing is to be found in its original state. Artists are engaged with the "willful confusion that is so characteristic of that which is specifically 'contemporary' in contemporary art, namely its very state of confusion (as to its own future, borders, and sense of 'belonging')" as Dieter Roelstraete agrees.¹⁵⁹ Artists continue to expand their role by recontextualizing the techniques and knowledge of other disciplines. They do this without the standard evaluative practices of those fields. They do this in order to find novelty, but their acts breed confusion. They do this to innovate, to push beyond repetition. But their absurdity is a self-perpetuating cycle of reaction.

To use Baudrillard's words, "The general aestheticization of things should be feared more. Much more than market speculation, we should fear the transcription of every thing into cultural, aesthetic terms, into museographic signs."¹⁶⁰ Contemporary art has expanded into everyday life taking from it and recontextualizing mundane activities into readymades for gallery presentation. These activities make simulations and representations of ongoing, common activities that have their own aesthetic qualities. Artists, through de-familiarization, seek to make art out of everyday occurrences.¹⁶¹ Take for example washing dishes. Most everyone washes dishes. An artist may wash dishes like anyone else. But a dishwasher's job is not an art, no matter how it's executed. Therefore, an artist washing dishes is dishwashing, it is not art because an artist performs it. It is not art when a dishwasher does it, nor when an artist does it.

159. Roelstraete, 192.

160. Baudrillard, 105.

161. For an introduction to the study of everyday aesthetics: Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford UP) 2010, Kevin Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," 2013, Ossi Naukkarinen, "What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics?" 2013.

7.4 Not truth

Wryly, Agamben proposes, “If today we gave the artists themselves the task of judging whether art should be allowed in the city, they would judge from their own experience and agree with Plato on the necessity of banishing it.”¹⁶² This is the necessity now that our reason has been obliterated. Plato was right, and art lead us away from truth. Unfortunately, this fact is far from universally accepted. Many artists maintain, despite any argument to the contrary, that their experimentation aims to make truth visible. Many in the art world believe their work to be for some sort of greater humanitarian good. Baudrillard disputes, “The only things verified in these experiments are the conditions of experimentation themselves, simply taken to their limit...It can all be reduced, finally, to quote Duchamp, to ‘dust breeding.’”¹⁶³ Social, anthropological, political, or scientific experiments are undertaken without any risk. Contemporary art’s self-comparative nature leads us nowhere, no closer to any truths about the nature of the situations artists seek to demonstrate.

From a different perspective, as Alain Badiou and others make clear, art does not fall into the realm of truth as it should not be a philosophical endeavor. Art, as such, deserves freedom from the premise of truth and requests only aesthetic contemplation. According to Badiou, “Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art.”¹⁶⁴ And, because he would contend, “A truth is an infinite multiplicity...A work of art is essentially finite.”¹⁶⁵

162. Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 6.

163. Baudrillard, 187.

164. Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Trans. Alberto Toscano. (Stanford: Stanford UP 2005) xiv.

165. Badiou *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 10.

As Schirmacher insists, “Art can no longer be a refuge for truth, in the long term it will merely represent a flight into illusion, even if it does have a dialectic force.”¹⁶⁶ Art has abandoned a place of neutrality.

The media of contemporary culture is saturated with images of reality--a mediated reality. Given that art is but one of many forms of media, it has to be implicated in this manufacture of a supposed reality. But its position of neutrality guarantees its protection from genuine criticism.

Still, confusion about our overall contemporary circumstances benefits those that manufacture and disseminate reality to form culture. This manufactured reality comes in all forms, from every perspective, each element with its own equal claim--each a particularity. Like Ranciere claims, “This equality destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by random circulation.”¹⁶⁷ Thus is the representation of democracy. In contemporary media culture, a professional artist’s Facebook link is equivalent to an amateur’s YouTube video, or a terrorist’s Twitter posts, or TV images of George Bush’s dog paintings. All of these forms of media, being open and accessible, are hardly distinguishable from a conceptual artwork. As a solution, Badiou proposes that “we should become the pitiless censors of ourselves.”¹⁶⁸

166. Schirmacher, “The End of Metaphysics.”

167. Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 14.

168. Badiou, *Fifteen Thesis on Contemporary Art*, #14

7.5 Existence

Work is the defining characteristic of contemporary culture (and art) and ever more important for social definition. What one 'does for a living' is taken as a more valid identifier than one's nationality or place of origin. Such is the influence of globalization. One's work (praxis) counts regardless of one's named, hyphenated, professional, social role. Imitation, like all work, is tiring. Consuming is work. Society now only *contemplates* work. For the artist, the act of re-presentation is the defining characteristic; how that comes about is no longer consequential. *All work is art-work*. But some still believe that their contribution will bring consequential change. The forms representation takes or the outcome of an action have no merit as to one's success or failure. Artistic skills or faculties are no longer necessary. Value is determined by ideology. It is merely that one professes the act of creation that one involves himself in the realm of representation. It is only necessary to exist and to profess one's existence. This profession becomes one's evidence of existence. Art is not needed to inform, manipulate, console, or innovate. These tasks are possible through any means of media or direct action. "Art now," as Baudrillard affirms, "is only an idea prostituted in its production."¹⁶⁹

169. Baudrillard, 89.

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