

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a grassy field with some tall, thin plants. To the left, there is a small, white, rectangular structure, possibly a beehive or a small shed, with a dark roof. In the background, there is a dense line of green trees and bushes under a blue sky with some white clouds.

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The Role of the Artist in Contemporary Art



Chad Dawkins

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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 disenchanted 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. Groy's 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.