

*Critical Hegemony and Aesthetic Acculturation* \*  
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I want to make some observations about contemporary art and the workings of the art world, in the attempt to demythologize certain aspects of both. I shall be speaking from the experience of an artist, but with the tools and perspective of a philosopher. Hence counter-examples to my claims must be fairly numerous, in order to demonstrate the need for revision of my many, admittedly empirical generalizations.

Let's begin by supposing that, at some relatively early stage of development, one exhibits some talent or interest in art-making, and that this is expressed in some spontaneous, untutored, creative product: drawing, say, or needlework, or mechanical inventions. We can expect that if this creative impulse is encouraged at all, its products will reflect the aesthetic values and conventions of one's immediate community, and be informed and determined by one's ethnic, economic, and political environment: Artists almost always treat issues in their work that are, in a broad sense, of personal concern to them.

Now let's speculate on who is most likely to make a career commitment to art, either as an artist, a critic, dealer, or collector. Art institutions in their present incarnations seem to offer the opportunity to achieve the highest standards of one's freely chosen craft, and the valued peer recognition and approval that accompanies it. On the other hand, posthumous or belated "discoveries" of unrecognized artists, as well as successful publicity campaigns for pre-packaged *enfants terrible de la minute*, demonstrate the lack of correlation of merit and professional success. Similarly, aspiring dealers and critics may learn all too quickly the economic dangers of staking their professional credibility on a single "movement" or individual. Hence one must be economically prepared to ensure one's material well-being in some other way, in case one's gamble on an art career is unsuccessful. A commitment to a career as an art practitioner requires that one is financially independent, or that one's family is, or that one possesses other economically remunerative skills, or that a permanently spartan lifestyle can be regarded as a novelty or a virtue, rather than as proof of social failure.

This precondition to professional commitment functions as a mechanism of selection among creatively inclined individuals. For it discourages those individuals for whom economic hardship has been, up to that point, a central reality. Art institutions in their present incarnations will tend to attract individuals for whom economic and social instability are not sources of anxiety, for they have correspondingly less reason to sacrifice the vicissitudes

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and satisfactions of self-expression to the necessities of social and economic pressure.

One immediate effect of this social and economic preselection is to create a shared presumption in favor of certain artistic values, i.e. a concern with beauty, form, abstraction, innovations in media, and politically neutral subject matter. Let us roughly characterize these as *formalist* values. Since economically advantaged individuals often import such values from an economically advantaged, European background environment, and since existing art institutions favor the selection of such individuals, it follows that these institutions will be popularized primarily by individuals who share these values.

This means that there is a broad consensus, within the interlocking system of art institutions, on the goals viewed as worth achieving. Artists, for example, will strive to realize broadly formalist values in their work; critics will strive to discern and articulate the achievement of such values; dealers will strive to discover and promote artists whose work successfully reflects these standards; and collectors will strive to acquire and exchange such work.

Individuals whose work or aesthetic interests fail to conform to formalist criteria are unlikely to pursue a career successfully within the constraints of existing art institutions. For the commitment of most art practitioners to the standards and values expressed in this consensus is a deep and central one, rooted, as it often is, in the prior socioeconomic balance of resources that engendered and continually reconfirms it. For such individuals, these values are a direct expression and idealization of their lifestyles. And their lifestyles, in turn, are justified and validated by the values such art expresses. Thus it is natural that such individuals tend to be less than receptive to critical scrutiny of those values, and to alternative conventions of art-making that violate them. For in questioning their universal legitimacy, such critiques implicitly question the socioeconomic balance that generated them. And for individuals who have a very deep personal investment in that balance, such critiques may seem to question the legitimacy of these very individuals themselves.

The long-range effect of this tightly defended consensus is that the art practitioners who share it determine - through their shared values and practices, and the economic and social factors that determine them - the criteria of critical evaluation for all art that aspires to entry into existing art institutions. I shall describe this as a state of *critical hegemony*. That is, the socioeconomically determined aesthetic interests of these individuals define not only what counts as "good" and "bad" art, but what counts as art, period. Through art education, criticism, exhibitions, and other practices and institutions devoted to preserving and disseminating what I shall refer to as *Euroethnic* art, the socioeconomic resources of this community of individuals

enable its art practitioners to promulgate its fascinating but ethnocentric cultural artifacts as High Culture on a universal scale. According to these shared criteria, then, those creative products dominated by a concern with political and social injustice, or economic deprivation, or that use traditional, or "ethnic", or "folk" media of expression, are often not only not "good" art; they are not art at all. They are, rather, "craft", "folk art", or "popular culture"; and individuals for whom these concerns are dominant are correspondingly excluded from the art context.<sup>1</sup>

The consequent invisibility of much nonformalist, ethnically diverse art of high quality may explain the remark, made in good faith by a well-established critic, that if such work didn't generate sufficient energy to "bring itself to one's attention," then it probably did not exist. It would be wrong to attribute this claim to arrogance or disingenuousness. It is not easy to recognize one's complicity in preserving a state of critical hegemony, for that one's aesthetic interests should be guided by conscious and deliberate reflection, rather than by one's socioculturally determined biases, is a great deal to ask. But by refusing to test consciously those biases against work that challenges rather than reinforces them, a critic insures that the only art that is *ontologically* accessible to her is art that narrows her vision even further. And then it is not difficult to understand the impulse to ascribe to such work the magical power to "generate its own energy", introduce itself to one, garner its own audience and market value, and so on. For nearly all objects of consideration can be experienced as animately and aggressively intrusive if one's intellectual range is sufficiently solipsistic.

Suppose one decides to make a career commitment to becoming a professional artist under these conditions. The critical hegemony of formalistic art, and particularly its pretension to transcend its ethnicity, can have a demoralizing effect on art students from different ethnic backgrounds. For in presuming to furnish and inculcate universal criteria of fine arts production, it implicitly subordinates and devalues the creative products of other ethnic groups. It thereby encourages the belief that such products are aesthetically or culturally inferior to those of the Euroethnic art tradition. Thus it encourages art students from other ethnic groups to reject their own culturally spontaneous modes of artistic expression, in order to emulate this one. I shall call this process one of *aesthetic acculturation*. Through the process, the pretension of formalistic art to universality chokes off its only sources of

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Goldstein makes essentially this point in "Art Beat: Race and the State of the Arts", *The Village Voice*, August 23, 1983. 31; and in "Art Beat: 'Darky' Chic", *The Village Voice*, March 31, 1980. 34. Also see Robert Pear, "Reagan's Arts Chairman Brings Subtle Changes to the Endowment", *The New York Times*, April 10, 1983.

cross-cultural enrichment. In this hothouse atmosphere, it is little wonder that observers of current trends in art conclude that there is nowhere for art to evolve but retrogressively.

Some have attempted to justify this pretension by appeal to purportedly universal and ethnically neutral criteria - claiming, for example, that formalist art is "high" art because it serves only aesthetic and nonpragmatic ends. But this line of defense is difficult to sustain, in the absence of further argument demonstrating that the alteration or expansion of one's perception of reality, the professional success of the artist, the communication of some idea, experience, or insight, receiving a profitable return on one's investments, and so on, are purely aesthetic and nonpragmatic ends. And even if this could be shown (which is unlikely), it would in any case remain a mystery why art that satisfies these criteria should be thought culturally superior to art that does not. For these meta-aesthetic criteria are no less ethnocentric than the aesthetic criteria they are invoked to justify.

A second, major disadvantage of art education qua aesthetic acculturation is its specialized division of labor. The intensive training in the skills and history of one's craft as an artist is purchased at the price of other skills needed to be a fully autonomous and responsible practitioner in the art community, and in society at large. The conceptual articulation and evaluation of an artist's aims and achievements, for example, is a task often relegated to the art critic, who researches the artist's past, interviews him, and fits his activity into the familiar conceptual framework of formalist art discourse. This validation, yielded by the critic's interpretation, is usually a major precondition for the work's validation by the art community at large. Even a negative review, in this regard, is better than no review at all; and the grossest critical misunderstanding is preferable to the most pellucid and self-critical appraisal by the artist.

Usually the interpretative function is one that the critic is eminently well-suited to perform. For the critic has usually received the training in verbal and intellectual skills that the artist has not, and often has thereby purchased the ability to interpret conceptually the artist's products at the price of the full development of the critic's own artistic impulses. Thus the phenomenon of the critic as closet artist: many art critics (as well as dealers and curators) whose views and pronouncements are highly influential in determining standards for the evaluation of art products are themselves artists - whose own artwork, however, is often completely independent of or even in conflict with the views on which their own critical reputations rest. To describe their attitudes towards their own artistic products as self-effacing is an understatement. The process of aesthetic acculturation tends to divest the artist of control over the interpretation and cultural meaning of the work by relegating that role to the

critic. But in accepting it, the critic assumes responsibility for disseminating critical standards from which she herself may be alienated.

Then there is the related phenomenon of the conflict of interest. Many art practitioners who have achieved recognition within the art community for their critical writings are justifiably reluctant to promote their own artwork, for both self-interested and ethical reasons. To utilize their own, highly developed critical and political resources to promote their artwork would open them to the charge of opportunism. But many such art practitioners also anticipate that their artwork would be found unsophisticated or unintelligent by comparison with their critical output in any case, by an audience accustomed to expect only a certain kind of output from those individuals. Indeed, such an art practitioner may be led to adopt a pseudonym under which to exhibit his work, merely to get an unbiased hearing for it. But even here the temptation may be great to utilize his political clout in its support. The phenomena of closet artist and conflict of interest dovetail in the recognition that as things now stand, the role of cultural interpreter and evaluator of work of art is a source of art-political power that is largely incompatible with the role of creating works of art.

One reason this division of labor is suspect is because - to butcher Kant's observation - words without artworks are empty, artworks without words are dumb. To relegate the creation and interpretation of art objects to different subjects is to bifurcate the experience of both. Artists are divested of control over the cultural meanings of their own creative impulses, while critics are denied access to theirs, in exchange for authority and control over artists'.

This highly specialized division of labor between artists and critics exacerbates the problem of critical hegemony. That art critics and not artists determine the cultural interpretation of an art product implies that there is no necessary connection between the set of contextualized experiences, associations, beliefs and intentions an artist brings to the production of a work, and its resulting cultural interpretation. These factors may, of course, enter into this interpretation, but only at the critic's discretion, and only in so far as it serves the critic's own theory of the work. This is particularly evident when the theory falls within the constraints of formalism as I have characterized it. Formalism encourages us to abstract from the personal subject-matter of the work, and consider its "universal" (actually its Euroethnic art-historical) significance. It also encourages us to evaluate the work in terms of such purely formal properties as shape, line, color, etc., independently of its subject-matter.

In some respects the formalist stance can be extraordinarily enriching, for it frees us to view all objects as containing the promise of beauty and meaning, without regard to function or context. On the other hand, it reinforces the alienation of the artwork from that particular meaning intended

for it by its creator. If the art-contextually legitimated meaning of the work is both independent of its function and context, and also - therefore - "universally" accessible (i.e. to anyone schooled in the canons of formalism), then its creator's intended meaning is obviously irrelevant. And indeed, many young artists who seek recognition within existing art institutions quickly learn to discuss their work in the impersonal and decontextualized manner that formalism requires.

Through its very impersonality, formalism can confer the *illusion* of understanding and accessibility to otherwise unfamiliar and ethnically diverse artifacts (witness, for example, the art community's appropriation of African tribal imagery as a consequence of Picasso's Cubist investigations, and its more recent attempts to assimilate hip-hop culture divested of its original context of significance). Here recognition and a genuine appreciation of otherness is sacrificed in order to preserve the appearance of authority and control. But formalism can only achieve this in collaboration with the division of labor earlier described. For of course the purely formal significance of such artifacts can be maintained only if any dissenting interpretation its creator might offer can be safely disregarded. And this, in turn, requires the belief that the artist's own, preacculturated contribution to critical discourse is irrelevant; or at best, of subsidiary importance. Thus formalism itself implies a certain critical hegemony, in subordinating all objects to criteria of evaluation that are independent of their original content, function and subject-matter.

Similarly, there is little room within existing artists' education programs for a course on the management of the economic and legal aspects of art production. The criteria by which a work is priced may seem a mysterious matter indeed. And it is often claimed that only a practical and thorough familiarity with the vicissitudes of the art market, plus a "good business sense", enables one to do so. Legal control over the distribution, exhibition, or exchange of the work is similarly dependent, in mysterious and mystifying ways, on the trustworthiness and good character of the dealer. Thus the dealer, rather than the artist, becomes the custodian of the market - and so aesthetic - value of the art product, and of its material fate as well. To suggest that such control should be assumed by the artist then becomes an insult to the relationship of trust and good will that exists between them - and may, indeed, lead the dealer to take the initiative in dissolving that relationship. Similar considerations apply to the role of the critic. Thus the artist relegates interpretative, social, and financial control of the product to the dealer and critic, whose informed judgment and taste are accountable for its fate.

This is an overwhelming responsibility for anyone, even the most highly cultivated and well-informed dealer or critic to shoulder. And so it is not

surprising that dealers may collaborate with critics and collectors, in a sort of "gentlemen's agreement", in order to ensure the critical and financial attention the dealer feels the artwork, and he, deserves.

A third feature that is usually absent in the training of artists is attention to the skills and information necessary to analyze and critique the social and economic preconditions for producing art; this is rather the provenance of the historian of contemporary art. Nor do artists usually learn how to scrutinize and dissect their own ideological, socially determined presuppositions; this is the provenance of the social theorist, who is able to view the entire interlocking network of art institutions as an historically specific, sociocultural phenomenon that engenders its own ideological justifications. But this, too, is often thought to be of no pressing concern to artists. I shall return to this question later.

Thus the end result of this process of specialization in aesthetic acculturation is a severely lopsided division of labor. The artist's function is the bare production of the work alone. She is neither expected nor encouraged to exert any control over the meaning, price, value, social and political impact, or material fate of the object; these are instead the provenance of the critic, dealer, and collector, respectively. Nor is she expected or encouraged to develop broader views about any of these things; these are rather to be relegated to the art historian or social theorist.

The result of this division of labor is, then, the essential infantilization of the artist as bare producer of art. Having divested himself of power and control over the work, he can then hardly be expected to participate in the interpretive, economic, and social processes by which the art product is assimilated into the art context - nor, therefore, into the political and cultural life of society at large. The artist "just makes the stuff", and therefore is not to be held accountable for its aesthetic, social, or political consequences beyond its bare production.

The result of this lopsided division of labor, inherent in the process of aesthetic acculturation within existing art institutions, is a pervasive alienation of the artist, both from her own creative processes and products, and also from the background sociocultural environment that engendered them. For by abdicating control over the meaning, value, price, function, and material fate of the artwork after it leaves her studio, the artist thereby abdicates her claim to have a special relation to that product which is significant and valuable in its own right. The art product is appropriated by the art institutions which legitimate it, and is thereafter governed by its cultural and economic laws, rather than the artist's intentions and wishes. This means that ultimately neither the creative process nor the final product is determined by the artist's own aesthetic imperatives.

One manifestation of the alienation that results from this division of labor is the phenomenon of *overproduction*. For example, a newly discovered artist may contract with a gallery to show new work, say, every two years. For some artists, the rate of production necessary to fulfill the contract may correspond perfectly with their natural rhythm of art production. For others, this rate of production may be far too high, producing stereotyped and superficial work that the artist has been pressured, by the terms of his contract, into producing. Now one might think the obvious solution would be to contract to exhibit less frequently, say, once every four or five years rather than once every two. But this is improbable. For the dealer's interest in contracting with the artist at a certain time is predicated primarily on her belief that the work will be financially marketable *at that time*, not on her faith in the enduring aesthetic value of the work; that is a conviction on which few experienced dealers would do business. And so if an artist desires gallery affiliation, and the prestige and recognition it brings, he must be prepared to adapt his rate of art production to the demands of the economic, not the creative process. Similar conclusions apply to the nonaffiliated artist whose work is currently in vogue. That the admittedly grueling rate of production necessary to sustain one's visibility, by participating in all the invited exhibitions, performances, lectures, residencies, or conferences, may be so extreme as to endanger the artist's physical or psychological well-being, is irrelevant for most artists. For they understand the economic and political workings of existing art institutions well enough to know that their professional success depends upon satisfying the extra-aesthetic demands that are made on them. That they are thereby manipulated by these demands, and alienated from their own creative processes, may seem a small price to pay for the recognition and support to which every serious artist aspires.

A related manifestation of this alienation is what I shall call the phenomenon of *deformation*. Faced with the pressures of overproduction, the artist has a few alternatives, besides that of simply refusing to meet all of these demands. She may produce shoddy work; or she may modify the product in ways that make it easier to produce; or she may employ others to make the work for her. She may thereby delegate to others an increasingly large proportion of the creative decisions that need to be made in the process of execution. If all concur in regarding the final product as a collaborative effort, well and good. If the artist does not, her collaborators' responses, as they confront an artwork attributed to the artist but that primarily manifests their creative decisions, may be mixed indeed. Each of these alternatives represent ways in which the form and content of the final art product can be modified to accommodate the extra-aesthetic demands of the economic process, to which the creative process is subordinate.



Similar deformations of the art product are often required by the artist's own desire to achieve and maintain a certain level of visibility and critical approval, even when the pressures of overproduction are absent. Critical and social recognition from within the art community is naturally and centrally important to anyone who aspires to professional success as an artist. But if the community's standards of aesthetic excellence are not independent of economic pressures, then the critical approval and economic reinforcement an artist receives for doing economically and critically viable work encourages that artist to produce more economically and critically viable work, even if it conflicts with his natural creative dispositions to do so. Thus we have the phenomenon of the artist who produces one kind of work for her gallery and another for herself; and of the artist who is reluctant to risk unfashionable departures from a successful and well-established formula, after having been reprimanded by silence or negative reviews for attempting such departures in the past. The obverse phenomenon is the artist whose output has been so completely canonized for the annals of art history that anything he produces, no matter how unskilled and superficial, automatically acquires aesthetic value and critical approval - in direct proportion to the price it can be expected to command at the next international auction. These are further ways in which the artist's alienation from his product may be manifested by deforming his product in response to extra-aesthetic imperatives.

Art products may also be deformed in response to imperatives from dealers for art that is sellable. Art that requires too great an effort at comprehension, or that too obtrusively violates traditional criteria of art, or that seems too difficult to commoditize, may be the target of a concerted attempt to make it just plain disappear from the annals of art history, through comprehensive survey exhibitions that ignore it or critical writing that marginalizes it. This conveys to artists a less than subtle message that to continue producing such economically nonviable work is to court obscurity. Those who take the hint often reform their art production accordingly.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the artist may deform her product in response to the demand for innovation. In order to preserve the profitable functioning of many existing art institutions, a continuous demand for new art must be created. And this can be done only by creating a desire for new art. This, in turn, requires the allegiance of the art community to innovation as an intrinsic value; i.e. the recognition of an artwork as good precisely and only because it does what has never been done before, advances some aesthetic a step further, or offers us a new and exciting experience, or forces us to revise our view of the world. And

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Brenson, "Artists Grapple With New Realities", *The New York Times*, May 15, 1983.

so artists often compete with one another in their quest for visibility and professional standing, by presenting increasingly bizarre and shocking work to an audience whose polite applause is predicated upon their inability to have conceived or predicted its advent.

In response to this fundamentally economic imperative of product innovation, artists may deform not only their work, but themselves to the point of suicide, by hanging, shooting, burning, starving, castrating, or maiming themselves, all in the name of High Culture. Just like the town in Florida whose inhabitants are known to amputate or maim their own limbs in order to collect the insurance, these artists gradually truncate themselves and their creativity in order to survive economically as artists. That a recent work of an artist proficient in this genre consisted in broadcasting an extended plea to his radio audience to send him money is a natural extension of this "aesthetic" stance.

Thus the comforting and often self-sustaining vision of the artist's studio as a self-contained realm of personal power and creative control, to which the artist can retreat from a chaotic and unmanageable external world, is a myth. For even her creative activity within that realm is largely determined by external socioeconomic imperatives which are, within the scheme of existing art institutions, beyond the artist's ability to withstand. The notion of the successful professional artist as the one who has been freed, by her gallery affiliation, and critical and financial successes, to devote all her time to creation, is, then, an *ideological fiction*. It is *ideological* because it serves the interests of those who prefer to preserve rather than improve existing art institutions. And it is a *fiction* because it is false that this brand of success promotes genuine freedom or creative expression.

That this appropriation of power, responsibility, and freedom in exchange for professional success need not be the norm is evidenced by comparing the condition of the artist to those of other creative producers in higher education. Take, for example, the historian. Like the artist, the historian draws on available information, personal experience, and insight, and an internalized set of standards - intellectual and academic ones, in this case - to synthesize an original creative product, i.e. a book or article. The standards by which the product is evaluated are themselves created and promulgated, through teaching, by that historian and his academic peers. And those peers, all equally practicing historians, subject the product to the critical scrutiny of those standards. That an article or book on history should be evaluated by others who do not themselves participate in the creative process is unthinkable. And that the criteria relative to which the product is evaluated should be articulated, amplified, and imposed by equally distanced others is equally unthinkable. Historians create, control, and survey critically

their own creative products. They do not recruit others to perform the hard task of intellectual self-evaluation for them. For that is the surest way to abdicate control over the self, and over the expressions of the self, that one can imagine.

Similarly, the pricing and public distribution of the historian's creative products are controlled by the community of historians. Articles and books submitted for publication are refereed by other historians, who thereby control the vehicles by which such products are brought to the public. An historian does not abdicate economic and legal control over the dissemination of an article or book to a journal editor or publisher, merely for the privilege of having the work disseminated at all. Rather, the product is protected by strict copyright laws, the producer is reimbursed, in part, by royalties, and the audience to the work is determined by the producer's conscious, strategic decision as to whom the work shall be addressed (other historians, students, the general public), and to what kind of publisher it should therefore be submitted.

Now one might be tempted to think that such a system could never work for artists, because, unlike books, art products are unique objects or events that can never be replicated. I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that this conviction is false, and that the assumption of uniqueness is, similarly, an ideological fiction, determined largely by economic interests, that serves to legitimate the economic and market criteria for *pricing* art products by equating those criteria with aesthetic criteria for *evaluating* them. If art products are not unique, like precious jewels, there is no reason why they should cost so much. If they cost less, artists would be unable to support themselves solely by producing them. They might then be more inclined to seek out supplementary jobs as critics, teachers, dealers, or curators of art, in order to ensure their livelihood, and thereby encourage critics, teachers, dealers, and curators to experience the artist's role first hand. This mutual exchange of roles and skills might engender both more artists who are critically adept and socially responsible, and more critics, dealers, and curators whose management of artists reflected personal sympathy, rather than professional self-interest alone. The possibilities for dialogue, cooperation, and collective action among such individuals who would be both informed and experienced in a multiplicity of roles, seem potentially unlimited. Although artists would then have less time to produce art, the art they produced would be more fully their own. For they would collectively determine its meaning, value, price, public dissemination, and material fate.

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<sup>3</sup> "Performance and the Fetishism of the Art Object", *Vanguard 10*, 10 (December 1981 - January 1982), 16-19; also see "A Proposal for Pricing Works of Art", *The Fox 1*, 2 (1975).