Art and the Artist in Society

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Edited by

José Jiménez-Justiniano, Elsa Luciano Feal
and Jane Elizabeth Alberdeston

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ART AND THE ARTIST IN SOCIETY
INTRODUCTION

JOSÉ JIMÉNEZ-JUSTINIANO
AND ELSA LUCIANO FEAL

This book is a collection of essays inspired by the College English Association-Caribbean Chapter's 2009 annual conference on the topic of art and the artist in society. The essays herein address directly or indirectly a problem that originated when the traditional definition of art was displaced by a conception of art that resisted the political and social circumstances of the time and tried to elevate it above the mundane. Indeed, the essays included examine the work and artistic practices of a range of artists, i.e., painters, sculptures, writers, performers,[1] in an attempt to answer questions, such as: Is art autonomous? Can society be irrelevant to the work of the artist, and is the artist's work, in turn, irrelevant to society? If there is a relationship between the artist and society, or if there should be, then how do artists influence society? What is, or should be, the place of art and the artist in society?

The question of art's place in society seems like a particularly modern one, since the role of the artist and the function of art remained relatively the same until the nineteenth century. Even if the first theoretical writings to consider art a critical enterprise appeared as early as the fifteen century (Williams 56-58), most of the production of art during the early modern period remained at the service of the governing institutions. Artists, then, were often no more than craftsmen who worked within a patronage system; they "rarely created works prior to the commission of their patron," whose "precise wishes and specifications would be laid down in a legal agreement" similar to a contract (Harrington 72-73). As a result, art expressed to a large extent, the vision of the patron and not that of the artist, who was reduced to the position of a skilled worker in a hierarchical society.

In an attempt to draw a clear line between art and craft that would elevate the artist's position in the social hierarchy, artistic academies emerged throughout Europe. These academies legitimized the act of creating art as "an appropriate activity for people of high social rank" by accepting aristocratic amateurs among their members while at the same time excluding "those they considered mere tradesman" (Williams 78). However, the social and economic success that these institutions might have afforded their members did not translate into greater freedoms for artists to pursue their work. In fact, the artist's creative expression seemed to have been hindered by the academies, which emphasized tradition over originality. The academies taught originality as "a product of imitation"; they taught their students that the artist "imitates, not specific effects, but general principles" in the work of those who have achieved greatness (87-88). In this way, the artists' personal style was often subsumed by tradition, and their work did not break with the past, but rather perpetuated it. This led to the standardization of the arts that artists would later disavow. Yet, the repudiation of the classicism developed through the academies was not only a rejection of its staleness but also of the State's control over art and the artists, since the academies had long been influenced by the State (75-79). As the result of government intervention, the academies served as tools for the political projects of the ruling class, as was the case in France, where the French Academy became "an instrument for the expression of… [Louis XIV's]….absolutist ideology" (Williams 85). Hence, while the position of artists in society might have improved, or seemed to improve, through the creation of the academies, their work still responded to the needs and views of others, as it had done in the past.

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[1] The term artist will be used in the introduction to refer principally to those producing works of plastic art and literature, but also, at times, to those involved in the production of other types of art.

This introduction aims to provide the context for the essays in this collection by discussing some of the conceptions of art developed during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The following two sections consider the way artists defined their roles in opposition to the traditional conceptions of art; how they first set themselves apart from the rest of society and how they reengaged with it.[2] Furthermore, these sections hope to highlight the complex relationship that artists often have with society and which informed their practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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[2] Critics and scholars have often divided and categorized the work of artist and writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century as modernist and postmodernist, despite the fact that there is continuation of the critical project of modernism in postmodernism (Williams 225). Following the example set by Sally Everett, who does not use the category of modernism in *Art Theory and Criticism*, we have refrained as much as possible from building our discussion around such broad categories. Yet, even as we build on Everett's book, it is necessary to look beyond the time period covered in her anthology to elucidate on how art has always been a part of society, how it is relevant to politics, and how the artists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries conceived of art as influential to other parts of society besides culture. For these reasons, we will refer to movements and schools only when necessary and will try to concentrate

The Nineteenth Century

In general, the nineteenth century was a period of constant political and social change as the new governments of the nation-states and the bourgeoisie strove to consolidate their power in the western world. Indeed, the period from the end of the revolutions of 1848 to 1870 in France was characterized by "rapid material progress" but also by "political intolerance." The various artists who faced immorality charges in the courtroom found that, even when they did not fully benefit from the progress, they were often victims of the ensuing intolerance. As a result of this, they "could hardly help seeing a connection between capitalistic values and a governmental hostility to creative work" (Nicholls 6-7). Consequently, they turned away from politics and focused on redefining art through stylistic revision (11). They rejected the utilitarian role that the bourgeoisie expected art to perform in modern society, i.e., the concealment and naturalization of "the damaging effects of 'progress,' rationalizing change by making it somehow continuous with a familiar, academic culture" (Nicholls 8-9). Artists saw exile from society as a prerequisite for a creativity that would allow them to escape the "mimetic principle at work in bourgeois modernity" and "the psychology of emulation underpinning a culture in which moral continuity was ensured by institutional habits of imitation" (13-14). In this way, it would seem that society was governed by a similar principle concerning imitation as the one expounded by the academies, since the principle governing society established that "we become truly ourselves by copying others" (13). Assuming the position of the exile and developing a unique style, could be seen as an effective critical challenge to both the artistic practices of the time and society in general. Indeed, many of the changes in art were first seen in the work of artists like Géricault, Delacroix, and Courbet (Williams 119-123), but it is Charles Baudelaire whom many scholars have identified as the central figure in this shift from the traditional art of the academies to modern art (124-125).

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on the idea of the artistic critical project. Furthermore, as a work of synthesis and exposition that is limited by the restrictions of space, it is impossible for us to include or mention all the movements and schools during this period. For a broader discussion of art history and theory, read Williams' *Art Theory* and Harrington's *Art and Social Theory*, which are referred to extensively in this introduction.

Charles Baudelaire's theoretical writings about visual art and poetry influenced artists and writers throughout Europe, and many of his ideas about art are still held as true by some people today (Williams 124-125). Perhaps the most prominent among these ideas is his steadfast belief in the artist's originality of vision, as opposed to the idea of originality through imitation. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire celebrates the self-taught artist M.G. (Constantine Guys), whose subjects are found in the modern world and who paints from memory rather than from the models provided by ancient artists. Indeed, Baudelaire explicitly criticizes the artistic convention promoted by academic theorists of "cloth[ing] all manner of subjects in the dress of the past" under the simple excuse that "everything is hopelessly ugly in the dress of a period" (403). Furthermore, he explains that, "If a painter…commissioned to paint a courtesan of today…were to get his inspiration…from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, the odds are that his work would be fraudulent, ambiguous, and difficult to understand" (405). For Baudelaire, the subject matter of the modern painter is modernity and his aim is to "extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distill the eternal [beauty] from the transitory [Modernity]" (402). Hence, the bases for the work of artists must come from their present reality, but their work does not need to be faithful to an objective reality as much as to their own perception of it. By painting from memory, Baudelaire explains through his discussion of M.G., modern painters can present the viewer with their impression of the world, an impression that is distinctly their own (406-407),[3] and which serves as their signature (395). However, enough details of the painted scene seem to be there for the viewer to recreate the artist's impression, and so the spectator "becomes a translator of a translation, which is always clear and always intoxicating" (406-407). The artistic representation becomes a form of personal expression in a way that it had not been before. It depends on the artists' integrity of vision and their power to reproduce the effects that that reality has on him rather than on their power to reproduce reality according to the standards of others, in this case, the academies.

Baudelaire moves away from the traditional concept of art as a means to teach and instill moral values on society's lower strata. In fact, he expressly states that even when the subject of art is the "display of ceremonies, the pomp and circumstances of national occasions," the modern painter does not paint "coldly and didactically, like [other] painters who see only lucrative drudgery in commissions of this kind, but with all the ardour of a man in love with space, perspective, great expanses or explosions of life" (414). Furthermore, in his writings about Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire presents the picture of an artist in love with art yet at odds with a utilitarian society that believes art should be didactic (Charvet 16-18). Didacticism is a "heresy," he says, "which includes, as inevitable corollaries, the heresies of passion, of truth and morality" (Baudelaire, "Further Notes" 203). The objective of art, according to Baudelaire, is to allow the soul to see "the splendours beyond the tomb"; "the poetic principle is strictly and simply the human longing for a superior form of beauty…which is a nourishment of reason" (205). This "longing for a superior form of beauty," the desire for perfection and originality found in the figure of the dandy ("The Painter" 420,) is what Baudelaire believed should be reflected in the work of both painters (M.G.) and poets (Poe).

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[3] Robert Williams also points out that Baudelaire makes a similar observation when he writes about Delacroix, that "His [Delacroix] character shapes his view of the world, and becomes part of the content of each of his work" (126). Hence, there is the expectation that an artist's work reflects his personality in some way or form, that the work of art is a form of personal expression, as pointed out later in the discussion.

Indeed, Baudelaire's main complaint about the didactic function imposed on art is that this obligation often came at the expense of the poetic effect, transforming art into a useful thing, when art should "raise men above the level of squalid interest" ("Further Notes" 204). The artistic work is only a spark that ignites the desire for immortality—for paradise—that leads the individual towards cultural (204-205), if not spiritual, improvement; this process of refinement seems to takes place individually. In his writings, Baudelaire emphasizes the originality of the self as much as the originality of the artistic work ("The Painter" 420).[4]

However, artists are never completely separate from society. They must be both above the crowd, and a part of it (399). According to Peter Nicholls, there is "a certain duplicity" in the modern artist, which can drive him to perversity, self-destruction, and failure (17-19). While this is the path that Baudelaire seems to have set for the artist, there is another path which separates the artist completely from society, allowing him to "retreat…into pastoral fantasy, withdrawing into the safer, more remote worlds of Arthurian legend or Trecento Italy" (Nicholls 17). This second path seems to be the one taken by many of the advocates of the art-for-art's sake movement later in the nineteenth century.

One of the major advocates of this movement was the Irish writer Oscar Wilde. Wilde argued in favor of many of the ideas proposed by Baudelaire, but went beyond them. For instance, Wilde did not only believe that the artist was free of any didactic function or even a moral responsibility, nor did he believe that art should be based on reality, since great artists do "not go directly to life for their subject-matter"; they look "for it in myth, and legend and ancient tale" ("The Critic as Artist" 261). In fact, in his essay, "The Decay of Lying," he proposes that "The proper school to learn art in is not Life but Art" (12). Since art does not imitate life, but rather life imitates it, "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself" (14). As a result of this condition, art has a life of its own, and its progress is not subject to other forms of human progress (24), so that ultimately, "the highest art…gains more from a new medium or fresh material than she does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any great awakening of the human consciousness" (20). Yet, while the social progress and the awakenings of human consciousness might have seemed, in Wilde's opinion, irrelevant to art, art was germane to society as it could awaken human consciousness through the development of the critical spirit.

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[4] For a more extensive discussion of individualism and originality in Baudelaire's essay and poetry, you can see Nicholls' "Ironies of the Modern" (the first chapter of the book cited here).

In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde argues that art is the starting point of a greater critical enterprise. Wilde explains how, thanks to the artist's "critical faculty," he "invents fresh forms" (254), and "it is [these] Form[s] that creates not merely the critical temperament, but also the aesthetic instinct," which "reveals to one all things under their condition of beauty" (289-290). In order to do this, art needs to be incomplete; it merely should be "a suggestion for a new work," so it "makes the critic a creator in his own turn" (264). According to Wilde, who called for a nation of critics (as well as creators, or artists) like that of the Ancient Greeks (249), art provokes a mood or an emotion and allows its audience an infinite number of experiences that they could not hope to have in real life, an exercise which will lead to their perfection (270-274). Hence, the critic—the audience—grows through his/her engagement with art and learns to refine this experience as an artist might refine the raw material found in the existing myths of a society and even in life.

Furthermore, Wilde believes that the objective of all artists is to use their critical faculties on the medium of their art. In fact, he sees the "distilment" of the different art forms as a prerequisite for achieving a perfection of culture. This distilment does not only call for the separation of art from society, but for the separation of the different art forms from each other. In painting, he praises the use of "Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with different form," as it "can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways" (288-289). On the other hand, in poetry, he laments the emphasis on the visual, on the marks that we read on the page (249). He believes that, in order to achieve greatness, there is a need to return to a criticism of language that favors the voice as "the medium, and the ear [as] the critic" (249). Indeed, much of the art, art theory, and criticism of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century concern itself with this separation of the arts. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the desire for this separation was equivalent to a conception of art irrelevant to other forms of art, culture, and society in general. As previously stated, Wilde, one of the principal advocates of the art-for-art's sake movement, believed that the changes that the arts could inspire would have an effect on society through the development of the critical spirit. In fact, the second part of "The Critic as Artist" ends with a utopian vision of a society unified by a refined culture. It would seem evident that, even when artists might consider their work autonomous from society, they did not consider it inconsequential.

Although the brief discussion of these two writers (Baudelaire and Wilde) may not convey the size and diversity of the debate on art during the nineteenth century, it provides a succinct explanation of some of the century's predominant conceptions of art. These conceptions fluctuate from a perception of art as a subjective enterprise in which the artist was partially separated from society, to a belief in art as an objective enterprise in which the artist seemed to be completely alienated from society and focused only on the medium. Despite this oscillation, these artists agreed on one thing: that art was autonomous from the political concerns of society. Art was not subject to the moral responsibilities previously been placed on it by the ruling classes; it did not teach but rather helped engender a critical sense in other individuals through formal innovation. In other words, art could provide a new way of looking at things in the world by presenting them in different forms. These "forms," or formal arrangements, would seem to reveal a hidden beauty in the world. The advocates of the "art for art's sake" movement would insist that even as the forms allow the artist to see the world in a new way; their beauty is formal and inherent in the presentation of the object and not on the subject matter in front of the artist. In this light, the immoral could be presented as beautiful.[5]

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[5] Although developed in the nineteenth century by writers like Baudelaire and Wilde, among others, this idea originated in the writings of the eighteen century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant explains how an object can be considered beautiful if its presentation, its form, creates pleasure for the viewer without any consideration of the function of the object (505), but this "reaction" is not connected to the pleasure that might come from satisfying physical desire. Instead, the pleasure that beautiful objects produce is preceded by the "mental state when imagination and understanding are in free play (in so far as they harmonize with each other as required for *cognition in general*)" (513;

Baudelaire and Wilde clearly hold beauty above morality, or at least, above the morality predicated by the bourgeoisie at the time. For them, beauty precedes morality and can be found anywhere. In fact, Wilde speaks of this when he compares journalists with artists and criticizes the attempt to circumvent the domain of art.

> Some limitation…will soon, I hope, be placed upon some…newspaper writers. For they give us the bald, sordid, disgusting facts of life…But to the artist, who accepts the facts of life, and yet transform them into shapes of beauty, and makes them vehicles of pity or awe, and shows their colour-element, and their wonder, and their true ethical import also, and builds of them a world more real than reality itself, and of loftier and more noble import—who shall set limits to him? (285)

Wilde rejects the realism as presented in newspapers, but defends the freedom of artists to draw from any subject, and use any material in their work. Thus, even things that are commonly perceived as immoral can be beautiful. For instance, the women from the streets painted by M.G. are depicted and perceived as having a "kind of beauty, which comes to them from sin," as Baudelaire points out in "The Painter of Modern Life" (430).[6] In this essay, the language of immorality and degeneration—words like "savagery," "barbaric," and "wildness"—are used to describe the beauty of the courtesan, which does not seem to be symbolic of the morally good, but

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his emphasis). In other words, an object can be beautiful when its presentation is agreeable, when "by means of sensation, [our] judgment arouses a desire for the object of that kind" and "it gratifies us," regardless of our use for such an object (507). This was the underlying premise behind the idea of art's autonomy. Yet, Kant also believed that beauty and morality were linked, or that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good" (534). This is not surprising, since the expectation at the time was for art to be morally uplifting. Robert Williams refers to the expectations of the critics in the early nineteenth century in his discussion of the critics' reception of Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, which was not morally uplifting (121). In her comparison of Andres Serrano's art with the art of Francisco Goya, Cynthia Freeland illustrates the importance of morality in the arts at this time, as well as at the end of the twentieth century. Most significantly, she explains that David Hume, another important philosopher of the eighteenth century who contributed to aesthetic theory, "felt artists should support Enlightenment values and moral improvement" (8).

[6] Many other scholars have commented on Baudelaire's irreverence and desire to shock. Robert Williams makes precisely this point concerning Baudelaire's discussion of the representation of prostitutes in M.G.'s work (129); P.E. Charvet has made a similar observation concerning Baudelaire's poetry (8).

of her sin. Her very immorality is, in fact, what makes her beautiful. This is an important distinction between the more traditional notion of beauty as representative of the morally good and the thinking of the nineteenth century artists and art critics.[7]

The disassociation of beauty from morality freed the artist of the nineteenth century to explore new subjects and forms. However, this distinction would seem to be less important in the twentieth century, when different forms of art became more abstract and less mimetic and less concerned with the question of their subject's moral adequacy. Once art was severed from the practical, political interests of society, and artists became more engaged with the artistic project of originality—creating something new—and the critical exploration of the medium, the question of what should be considered art and what should be its role in society became more prevalent. Unlike the works of art of the early nineteenth century, which shocked audiences by their graphic irreverence to social and artistic conventions (Williams 119-123), art produced during the twentieth century seemingly abandons all conventions, often making it perplexing to the audience. In this way, the art of this century seemed to finally require pronouncements of artists and critics on the purpose and function of art (171-172).

The Twentieth Century

The twentieth century was as much a period of change for the arts as the nineteenth century had been. The effects of two world wars during the first half of the century and the tensions of the Cold War pushed artists to turn against the very institution of art as they explored new mediums and methods to engage with society and ultimately resist the commercialization of their works.[8] Indeed, the twentieth century saw the final integration of the arts into a capitalist economy. While semi-autonomous public institutions played a role in financially supporting artists during this century, this did not diminish the need for additional support from private sources, especially, "from commercial sponsorship and from charitable organizations" (Harrington 78-81).[9]

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[7] Despite providing artists with an argument for autonomous art, Kant argued that beauty and morality were connected, since the act of making an aesthetic judgment is equivalent to making a moral one. For him, beauty and morality seem to be intrinsically linked, as suggested by the moral connotation of the language used to talk about beauty (534-535). Baudelaire's writing would suggest no connection between beauty and morality.

[8] Two examples of this type of movements are Dada and Surrealism (Williams 187-190). Dada, for instance, proposed "new methods and values" as the foundation for a radically new way of life, where art was the means for "the cultivation of the irrational…as a[n]…antidote to the pervasive poison of the corrupted reason" (188).

Paradoxically, the strategies used by artists during the nineteenth century to resist the government's pressure to commercialize their artistic work and place it at the service of the ruling classes seems to have contributed to the consolidation of a market economy. After all, the advocates of the art-for-art's sake movement valued 1) the work of art, which was an object that could be owned, displayed, and even exchanged; 2) its complex formal quality, which not everyone was able to understand and appreciate; and 3) its distinction from popular, representational form of arts. These are all qualities that led artists to produce objects that could serve as identity markers for the higher classes with the financial resources to purchase the art and the education necessary to understand it (89-100).[10] Despite these circumstances, many arts movements in the twentieth century maintained

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Dadaists would repudiate "indispensable idea[s]" of art, such as the understanding that "art was the product of human decision." In fact, the creative process allowed random chance to play a significant role that undermined the role of the artist (189). Ultimately, artists saw in these art practices a disjointing of society, since, for them, there was a clear connection between "the rejection of traditional art… [and]…the rejection of a social system dominated by the interest of the mercantile middle class" (190). The Surrealist, on the other hand, believed in accessing the "non-rational resources of the mind": the imagination and the unconscious (195; 197). The surrealists saw their practices as liberating and revolutionary, and they went as far as to propose that they could serve the Communist Party by changing the name of their journal to *Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution* (Williams 198).

[9] The social changes that affected art were not uniform; they did not occur everywhere at the same time; and they did not affect all arts in the same way. For instance, literature and painting had been a part of market economy for centuries, but the Dutch market for oil paintings in the seventeenth century differed significantly in its size and type of audience from the literary market in eighteenth century England (Harrington 75-78). In the same way, the autonomous state institutions that emerged in support of the arts continued to play a role in the art world of the twentieth century, but this role was waning in favor of a free market economy. As critics and scholars, like Nicholls and Harrington, have noticed, the commercialization of art was a major preoccupation for artists in the nineteenth century but much more so in the twentieth century.

[10] For an in depth discussion of how the art-for-art's sake movement and the "thesis of aesthetic autonomy" might have served to legitimize the bourgeoisie and consolidate capitalist society, read "Consumption and Aesthetic Autonomy" in Harrington's *Art and Social Theory*.

as one of their central objectives the development of culture and a critical attitude in their audience.

For instance, in the 1930s, Clement Greenberg writes an article entitled, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in which he warns society that subordinating art to financial necessities and interests of the free market would stifle cultural growth, especially, due to the emergence of “kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature” in western societies (31; 33). In fact, Greenberg describes kitsch as the common culture of the totalitarian regimes that were emerging in Europe, since it provides the audience with the effect of art, a digested sensation that keeps people complacent and culturally stagnant (36-38). In opposition to kitsch, he offers a defense of the formalist avant-garde, which seems to derive in part from the art-for-art’s sake movement of the nineteenth century.

The avant-garde here refers to the artists who produce work that “affronts the sensibilities of the popular culture by showing distorted images in unnatural colors,” so as to push society along the path of cultural progress (Everett x). More specifically, Greenberg explains how avant-garde artists produce art that initiates a critical process by requiring their audiences to come to terms with the work on a plane different from that of reality. Indeed, the complex formal qualities of this abstract art are hard to understand by the spectator because it is not mimetic and can often seem “austere and barren in comparison” to kitsch which aims to embellish reality (“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” 35-36.) These qualities demand a greater effort from spectators because they are presented only with the cause of art rather than the effect, and this effort forces them into a state of reflection (34-35). The complexity of this type of art makes it useless to totalitarian governments, since it is more “difficult to inject effectively propaganda into” it, and it helps develop a reflective stance in the audience, which seems contrary to the complacency necessary to maintain a dictatorship (36-38). Hence, Greenberg sees in the modernist art of his time a very practical political purpose, even if not the principal purpose of art.

Greenberg continued to defend the formalist avant-garde during the twentieth century and in the 1960s published “The Modernist Painting.” In this essay, he argues for the purification of the arts and the progressive exploration of the formal properties of the art object as part of the long term critical project of the artist, which in the case of painting, for instance, was an exploration of the flatness of the canvas that is analogous with science (115). However, aside from Greenberg’s defense of formalist art as part of an avant-garde, certain critics and avant-garde artists during the twentieth century advocate other types of art, which involved subjective, often unpredictable elements outside the artist's control.

Contextualist art, for instance, is situational; it only exists under a particular set of conditions which "include an artist, an object to use as a channel of communication and a recipient" (Everett x-xi). In other words, what matters for a contextualist artist—what holds the greatest value—is the context, not the object. This new view of art eventually led to the dematerialization of art. By the 1960s, Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler observe, artists have become less "interest[ed] in the physical evolution of the work of art," the art object, and much more on the "thinking process"—the conception—of the work and the idea(s) behind it (46). For these artists, the art object is not autonomous but should be seen in the same way one would see a language, where the objects "are signs that convey ideas." Even if the conceptual work of art "still stands or falls by what it looks like," this new understanding of the field allows the artist's work to carry more information, so that it can "set critic and viewer thinking about what they see rather than simply weighting the formal or emotive impact" (49). Here, the ephemeral nature of the contextualist and conceptual works of art allows the artist to escape the demands of the market, since, for them, art is no longer about an object, while the combination of the aesthetic and the intellectual reveals an interest in having a greater and perhaps more explicit engagement with the world (Williams 234). Artists are not only interested in changing their position in society as providers of commodities, that serve as markers of social status, but also in changing the minds of their audiences about social issues.

Indeed, the changes promoted by artists from the avant-garde in the second half of the twentieth century are the long-term changes in the audience's consciousness, not short term changes, as Robert Irwin explains in "'The State of the Real' and 'Reshaping the Shape of Things'" (compiled by Jan Butterfields).[11] According to Irwin, the artist aim is the "threading of totally new concepts in old structures" (148-149). These concepts are the "working tools" we use to understand the world (147), and as we acquire new concepts, the shape of our reality changes (142-143). Thus, avant-garde art changes the consciousness and the perception of the individual; it prepares them to see more, if not clearer. This means the dismantling of many of the ideas upon which artists gained their authority in the nineteenth century, such as the idea of that the artist is an individual set apart from society, and thanks to this distance, he sees the world in a unique, perhaps privileged way.

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[11] This article appears in the works cited page in the same way as it appears in the original source: under Butterfields.

In "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," published in the 1980, Lucy R. Lippard describes the changing attitude towards art and the artist:

> It all begins with…[that]…idealism—the one we are fed in schools—about art being some exalted "gift" to society and artist being lone, superior geniuses, whopping it up in their ivory garrets. However, when students get out, they often find it is hard to give their "gifts" away: some succeed, some get bitter, and some try to demythologize the role of art…to see art as a mutually stimulating dialogue, rather than a specialize lesson in beauty or ideology coming from the top down. (187-188)[12]

As Lippard observes, the art and the artist of the second half of the twentieth century broke down all the divisions and challenged the foundation of high-brow culture. For instance, formalist beauty was abandoned by minimalist and conceptualist artists who slighted the importance given to the medium—the art object— which had been the source of beauty since the nineteenth century. The work of these artists in the twentieth century "set the stage for" and ultimately responded to "the TV generation's preference for information and analysis over monumental scale and originality" (194-195). Furthermore, beauty became subordinated to irony and humor, so that art was no longer a well-disciplined cult of beauty that bound the artist to a specific form, but rather a carnivalesque, satiric drama. As such, art was increasingly concerned and involved with social issues. For many artist, in fact, the principal objective of art at this time was the denunciation of social conditions and/or "to make heard and seen those voices and faces hitherto invisible and powerless" (187).

The artist was not seen only as individual; he could and would often be considered part of a collective that used different mediums and technologies to communicate a message. In fact, the collective could participate in the act of creation, becoming, in this way, "the artist." Art became more than a personal expression; it became a means to represent a social group. While this art might be simpler—easier to comprehend by the general public—Lippard insists that it does not have "to be simplistic," since "what may appear simple or stereotyped to one audience may be rich and meaningful to another that is more involved in the specific issues" (200-201). Hence, artists are forced to create a wide variety of strategies to achieve social change through art.

Literature of the second half of the twentieth century is also being transformed; its dominant characteristic became suspicion towards realism

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[12] While Lippard is speaking here specifically about the activist artist (and the political artists), the observations she makes in this passage may be applied to the artist during this time.

(Nicol 22). As Bran Nicol points out, the postmodern fiction of this period uses irony, double coding, and meta-fiction to create narratives that highlight their artificiality. These narratives do not make any claims to presenting a realistic depiction of the world or even an idealized one but aim simply to show how the very act of narration is a form of construction "by staging the clash between real and represented worlds." In doing so, they "encourage us to pursue the implications to their logical conclusion: fiction is fictional, but no more so than reality." The suspicions created by these texts, that the fictional world is a construction of the author, are transferred to the real world of the readers, so that the readers becomes increasingly aware of how the world they live in is no more than a construction of the authorities, i.e., the government, the church (39). This does not only serve to form skeptical readers but also skeptical citizens, which will question the validity of social institutions and divisions.

Furthermore, Nicol explains that this literature calls for the reader to "read in a new way" (40), since there are a number of postmodern texts that do not have a clear meaning. These texts only offer disparate clues to its meaning, which require that the reader collaborate with the author, as an active reader, or even a type of co-author. Hence, literature becomes similar to a collaborative art piece, in which the author has lost a great deal of his authority over the text. In fact, double coding, or the inclusion of multiple codes in fiction, results in texts that encourage a rhizomatic reading: a reading where the interpretative possibilities continuously multiply and all the truths considered in the text remain equally possible, even at the end of the narrative. Ultimately, postmodern literature does not only allow for greater interpretative freedom but also a greater number of accepted interpretations, so that it prepares the readers to accept "different, co-existent…worlds" (43-49). By breaking with the idea of an authoritative story—a single possible view of the world, these new literary strategies and reading practices open a space in art for those whose experiences had previously been excluded from society by the authorities, as observed by Nicol in his discussion of postmodern fiction written by women and other minorities.

The inclusion of marginalized groups in privileged social spaces and the issues of the representation of minorities were central to the artists in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Williams 235-236; 253-254). The arts represented a social and political tool for those who had been marginalized because of their gender or ethnic origin. In art they could preserve their experiences and cultures as well as bring to the forefront issues that had gone unnoticed or ignored by society, such as "issues of racism and cultural assimilation" (Freeland 84-85). Indeed, as Cynthia Freeland points out, even though art cannot capture the totality of the experience of living in a community, it can still play an essential role in "addressing basic questions we face—as citizens and individuals—within an ever-new and often precarious situation" (87).

Therefore, the changes in art during the twentieth century allowed for a greater participation and engagement of society with the arts, and the artist with society. This is evident in the centrality of performance not only in theatrical presentations, but also in photography, and art exhibits/installations. However, as the previous discussion highlights, the development of a critical spirit as the aim of art has been present since the nineteenth century, even if other aspects of the older conception of art were abandoned, as noted by scholars like Robert Williams. In fact, it is likely that various aspects of these two conceptions of art co-existed and served as background for the work of the artist at the end of the twentieth century. Sherrie Levine, an artist who questioned the importance given to originality by artist and critics in the nineteenth century, best expresses these particular circumstances.

As previously stated, Baudelaire and Wilde were breaking with the most traditional conceptions of art of their time when they argued that artists should be motivated by a desire to be original and develop new forms in their work. Sherrie Levine challenges this idea during the last half of the twentieth century, when she exhibited reproductions of well known works from other artists under her name (Williams 245). In an interview with Jeanne Siegel, Levine qualifies the idea of originality championed by Baudelaire when she explains that she "think[s] of originality as a trope," since "There is no such thing as an ahistorical activity": everything is influenced by one's experiences in society (266). Her work reflects her own anxieties about finding a place as a female artist in an art world driven by "male desire," and about being represented by others and the challenge of representation in general (267; 272). However, she understands that her ability to change these circumstances is limited by her position within the artistic tradition and within society. Indeed, she confesses that she has a "traditional relationship with art," that she "love[s] art and modernist art in particular" (271). However, she admits that "We no longer have the naive optimism in art's capacity to change political systems—an aspiration that many modernist projects shared…we find that simple faith very moving, but our relationship to that simplicity is necessarily complex" (270). For this very reason, the strategies used to affect these changes are not always straightforward, clear or even simple, but they often have to be complex and indirect. What remains important is that the viewer does not immediately ignore and reject the art they cannot understand as inconsequential, since, in Cynthia Freeland's words, art remains the principal means for "enhancing our awareness of both…ourselves…and of the world" (207), so the "Artist[s] will be at the forefront as we explore and expand our awareness" (209).

To a large extent, the objective of this collection, as well as that of the conference that inspired it, is to strive for a better understanding of how art works today within society. Indeed, the essays included here are concerned with many of the issues addressed by the artists and critics discussed above. In them, the scholars who contributed to the collection discuss specific artists that either were informed by these general trends, or were reacting to them, as they attempted to define art, approach their work, and find a place for themselves in society.

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The seventeen essays included in this collection offer varied points of view and mark the variety of critical approaches and concerns of an admittedly broad topic that includes art, society and the person who produces it: the artist. The scholars herein do not only examine the visual arts and literature but also public art, performance art and the relation that might exist between the artist and his work and society in general. This collection is organized around six subtopics: "Redefining Art," "The Representation of Women," "The Body of the Artist," "The Effect of Public Art", "Alternatives in Art," and "Home, Exile and Art."

The first chapter entitled "Redefining Art" addresses the changing nature of art, and what has been considered artistic, or of artistic value. The first two essays in this chapter deal with art that struggles to find acceptance with the general public and which is often browbeaten by the critics. This group of essays shows how the rejection of the classical standards of mimesis and beauty has made it difficult to recognize art. Furthermore, they explore how the rejection of established forms and subject matter serve to subvert traditional values in society. The first essay, "From Taste to taste: An Approach to Disgusting Art" by Rafael Jackson-Martín focuses on art considered "disgusting" for it emphasizes bodily functions and waste, topics deemed inappropriate in polite company. By placing the disgusting in the place where society expects to find beauty, the artist challenges the standards and decorum imposed on by the bourgeoisie. Laura Lake Smith, on the other hand, considers the work of an artist whose art is not shocking, but rather perplexing to the viewer. In "'the course of true love never did run smooth,'" Lake Smith examines the artist Richard Tuttle, his work, and its reception. She argues that Tuttle's work is often misunderstood and underappreciated for it fails to meet the neat categories people subscribe to art, especially when attempting to *sell* it to others; however, it can create an experience to nourish the inner life. In the last essay of this chapter, "From Cuba with a Song," Rebeca Rosell Olmedo asks whether there can really be a dialogue between the artistic (graphic) and the word (text) in the work of the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy. In her attempt to answer this question, Olmedo explores Sarduy's allusions to the visual artists, Wifredo Lam, Victor Vasarely and James Ensor. Olmedo's essay does not only study how Sarduy's novel attempts to challenge the separation of the arts by exploring the boundaries between painting and the novel, it also examines the way Sarduy uses this interartistic dialogue to expose issues concerning Cuban national identity.

The second chapter, "The Representation of Women," focuses on a traditional subject for artists: the depiction of women. The two essays in this section are concerned with the ways in which societal norms influence the ways in which women are represented in art and how artists can review, revise and expand on the masterpieces of the past by including other perspectives to counter artistic and historical absences. Brenda Palokangas' essay, "Infusing the Vrouwe," explores how the representation of women in Johannes Vermeer's *Young Woman with a Pitcher* and Piet Mondrian's abstract grid *Composition with Large Blue Plane* responds to the cultural and philosophical ideas of the time and suggests that, although the artists, "manifest no obvious commonality," they were complicit in their portrayal of women as submissive and orderly; that is, in conveying the ideal Dutch *vrouwe*. On the other hand, in "Rewriting Female Representations in *Girl with a Pearl Earring* & *Girl in Hyacinth Blue,*" Jacqueline H. Harris analyzes two novels by contemporary female writers that explore women's complex relationship with art. Harris argues that the first novel, Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, gives a voice to the anonymous model in Vermeer's painting of the same name and explores how the protagonist must define herself against the artist and the artwork. In the second novel, Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Harris argues, the protagonist rediscovers her true self through art. Through her discussion of these two novels, Harris explains how fiction can open a space for those that have been previously marginalized.

"The Body of the Artist" constitutes the third group of essays. In this chapter, the body, the corporeal takes center stage. How does the artist portray, reference, and use the body in his or her work? In "Poesía en estado naciente," Ann Cerminaro-Costanzi analyzes the uses of the body in the poetry of the Spanish Nobel prize-winning poet Vicente Aleixandre. According to Cerminaro-Costanzi, in Aleixandre's poetry the body is depicted "as a space of intense creativity and expansion." Yet, his use of the landscape to signify the body may be regarded by some as not entirely avant-garde. In contemporary art, it may seem that the more radical forms of artistic representations are being expressed by the performative artists, as is the case of Daniel Joseph Martinez and Coco Rico. In "Extreme Gestures and Sublime Provocation," Dianna Marisol Santillano takes on the work of Daniel Joseph Martinez, a photographer based in LA whose work challenges notions of the social and the political. Santillano argues that Martinez works outside the traditional spaces of art to live up to a Nietzschean ideal: the elimination of all idols that keep humans enslaved to tradition and institutions. In "The Feminist Pleasures of Coco Rico's Social Interventions," Lucian Gomoll foregrounds his analysis of the work of the performative artist Coco Rico on the theoretical work of Laura Mulvey′s seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Gomoll argues, however, that Coco Rico challenges the male gaze by displaying carnivalesque images of the body that are ambiguous or just plain confusing to most audiences. Furthermore, Coco Rico uses the spectators' confusion to rope them in a "perversion of the male gaze" and promote feminist and Marxist ideals as well.

The group of essays in "The Effect of Public Art" examines the relationship between public art, or art displayed in public places, the issues that are inherent to this art, and its effects on its surroundings. These essays look at how this art, which might not present a clear and direct idea, and is at times less concerned with formal experimentation, often manages to effectively communicate a social or political message. In "*LOVE* at 55th and 6th Avenue," Newman studies the ubiquitous *Love* sculpture and its effects on the public space. She argues that due to its instant connection with the general public, its creator Robert Indiana has never been clearly associated to the artwork and it has thus, taken on a life of its own, almost as if it had sprouted mushroom-like. Another popular piece of art studied in this chapter is the Obama *Hope* poster created by Stephen Fairey to support the Obama campaign in 2004. In "Street Art for 'Street Cred,'" Cynthia Martin argues that in order maintain his street credibility alive, the creator distributed the poster free of charge, which also allowed for its rapid dissemination. Michelle Moravec's essay "Feminist Art Activism in Public Spaces" explores the work of two feminist artists, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, who "pioneered the use of public space…to address the issue of