



Life

As

a

Readymade

I.

*An open letter to the art world and to anyone
who considers himself an artist,
or “artist” is not a profession*

*Nature is a haunted house—but Art—a House
that tries to be haunted [?]*

—Emily Dickinson

I see many people young and aging [myself included] who believe that it's their station to promote the word art. The tradition of the Romantic has 200+ years later become the pragmatic of or oblivion of identity. Let's call it, "identitude" (like the pseudo-GWBushism, "dignitude"), or me-ism, in the vestments of creative liberalism. It's easy to imagine that people have had creative impulses since time immemorial, but the belief that each human mind bears the native right to share its unique bounties with the world, that all minds are creative-equal, i.e., creative liberalism, is a recent development.

I was incensed when I was writing above the *m*'s. I want to somehow remain so, even if a night's sleep has pacified me...

Where Romanticism thrived on Northern European weather patterns, TB, opiates, psychosis, and premature death, 200+ years later the weather is as bright and fair as the day the Declaration of Independence was signed and American libertarianism/ecumenicalism became a way to live philosophy without thinking any further. Action becomes enough—liberty resides therein. Without thinking any further, creative avenues become “manifest destiny.” “Manifest destiny” is state-sanctioned and, as such, protected. With protection, fear is abated, comfort pursued, and identity becomes unalienable right. The right to create lazily and exponentially usurps the rite to create (or rite of being created).

So we have this word “art.” Uses that come to mind:

#1 A tradition of content quality understood from any number of contemporary kens. #2 A complacent acceptance of the primacy of painting and sculpture (and maybe collage too) in fabulous denial of these media’s vicissitudes and technological progeny (the fact that the terms “video art,” “performance art,” “installation art,” “fine art photography” even exist is a failure to break this complacency). #3 A red herring used to maintain the illusion of privilege afforded to a complacent tradition of content quality. #4 A moment/pocket in spacetime, i.e., an intuitive feeling that art can be anything anywhere anytime.

#1 Content quality, that is, content of a certain genus. This content has always been elected by a cadre-like network, mostly reducible to the learned and the moneyed. From the court of content, models are upheld, and these models are then stamped with a word: art. This word is then disseminated into other bodies of society.

#2 Renaissance art is what allowed our art to be called art. An inability to realize that the achievements of Michelangelo and Dürer are very rarely in direct conversation with contemporary painting and sculpture is kind of stupid. The ability to *see* John Currin's art being a result of something like Mary Tyler Moore is more to the point. Richard Serra's art: photographs of the Great Pyramids. Cy Twombly's: guys like Goethe and guys like Picasso. Steven Spielberg's: the Lippis, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio. Richard Branson's: Alberti. Trey Parker and Matt Stone's art being a result of any number of Aristophaneses is more understood for some reason. AbEx pathos/play has a place: it's called poetry.

#3 Yeah, right, this one. How to fool oneself and one's contemporaries into believing that the station of art-elected-by-an-artworld is the primary station of art. Really, who is kidding who[m]? Obviously we're kidding a lot of people, ourselves included, who don't have enough self-confidence to trust that there are lots and lots of naked emperors in the room.

#4 Art is a state of mind and experience understood by any number of people at any number of moments. Art is cognitive grasp of aesthetic(izable) breadth-and/or-specificity translated into distinct sensations of awe, beauty, recognition, recollection... Art is thread that fords potent rivers of metaphysical matter.

“With the state of art, there is a far more byzantine implication: that of art as light-device in service of social accomplishment.” That’s what I wanted to talk about last night. Just trying to re-tap into what I was so keenly about to bitch about. “Social accomplishment” was my bearing witness to toadyism and/or an inability to distinguish between general decorum and inexorable posture, it was seeing people congratulating themselves on servicing the word art, and my staunch suspicion that this servicing was somewhat disingenuous. I’m not exculpating myself, but I’d rather shoot myself in the foot than be laissez-faire.

*And I know all the games you play,
because I play them too*

—George Michael

Social accomplishment is a couplet of words open to many interpretations. Indeed social accomplishment is generally above reproach. Indeed an artist is a person and as such is inextricable from the social fabric. Indeed that artist wishes for an audience (whether real or imagined) in some way. Indeed art is a process of myriad macro- and micro-social interactions that establish constellations of relationships between things called art and people who encounter them; this is its basic circulation through the social body. But I find it increasingly difficult to discern between the practice of making art and the social erotics permeating the current sea and currency of art in the #3 sense.

Your girlfriend can hold a camera—great, let's give her a show! Your boyfriend can throw clay, and ceramics are in this month—give him a show! Your sister plays 23 notes on the piano—awesome, it's gonna be some crazy important music!

One merely needs to aver that one is creative in order to have created—identitude. Call it Warholism (perhaps to Andy's discredit).

The means of averring one's creativity are manifold; the end of averring one's creativity is creating a brand. A brand (even if called by another name, "position," for instance) is certainly nothing new or deplorable. Yet, with identitude the brand is founded on the Warhol doctrine: me is adequate enough. Can this be wished/willed/publicized into art? It would seem so.

15 minutes of fame is a funny thing. Although it might just be a prescription/conscription to join the ranks of culture-making, it stinks like an admonition. It implies “everything’s fine” and “we’re all fucked” at the same time. As usual, Andy has had his cake and eaten it too, leaving us chewing on cupcake wrappers.

From many-brow quarters the means of producing brands are too diverse to hold any given person “in contempt of art.” With identitudinal proliferation, the marketplace has become supersaturated. Supersaturation inhibits the shared experience of (what once was) art. (What once was) Art is left for us to scavenge while its memory circulates *ad nauseam*.

In the din/face of identitudinal proliferation, art[s] history would seem to be a construction/contraption/confection losing its application. Still whatever prejudices it may have, art[s] history has managed to cultivate a canon and an aesthetico-philosophical logic to aver “real” sites for the experience of art. It has afforded a temple for types of worship, and this has effectively defined the word art for the last 200+ years. But I don’t think art[s] history can handle identitudinal proliferation. I don’t think identitude can inventory its own inventory.

Invoking Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian dyad for fun: art[s] history cannot exist in the realm of the Dionysian; art only exists when the *ratio* is functioning. The Apollonian is the *ratio* and one visits and returns-from the Dionysian via the Apollonian station. Art is a rational category applied to irrational plasmas. Art being a rational category, it must quantify as well as qualify.

How
to
quantify
in

an
ocean
of
supernumeraries
?

Art[s] history has become an oxymoron in a way it never anticipated. Instead of the Apollonian applied to the Dionysian, the Dionysian is applied to the Apollonian: everything can be art! Art[s] history indefinitely adjourned!

Who/what is an artist nowadays? Do we keep dusting off the archives of under-impressive creators/creations because we hope someone will give us the same courtesy in an imagined future? Or rather, is it fun/interesting just to like things for a second or two, and fun/interesting is edifying enough?

#5 Art is something made within the confines of the artworld. Art fairs are art fairs. Art museums are specialty shops and cabarets.

It is the image and the phantom that look

—Paul Valéry

#6 There is something that pervades the centuries and millennia. It is mankind looking at itself. There are moments when art arises. These are the moments when somebody is reminded of things that are true (and beautiful/horrible) and out of reach. Art reminds us of joy and ruin. And then it's gone until it returns.

#6.5 Notice how [in the US at least, since I don't live somewhere else] comedy seems to be a premier candidate for good art of the past 20 years: Simpsons, Seinfeld, South Park, Curb Your Enthusiasm, even Colbert—metaphysics, chimeras, ontology, the gossamer of ethics all in a punch. Comedy has metamorphosed into something bigger/realer than it was. Or am I tripping? And then there's The Wire, the only thing that has approximated tragic drama since the imagined deaths of Kurt, Tupac, and Biggie. 9-11 transcends tragedy and might actually survive as real art, which Stockhausen may or may not have understood. And then there's the pharmacy we call science fiction.

#6.85 Maybe the vanguard is simply "Reality" or User Preferences.

#7 Art becomes the ocean of digital experience, taking us in its currents. Here and there and back again, *ad infinitum*. Each person his/her/his own Homer. Matrix dystopia? Nature cults rise up?

Leave the
word art
behind and go
find/make its
stuff some-
where else.
Or stick
around and
celebrate the
boondoggle.

II.

A few weeks later at the art fair, and then a few weeks after that, and then a few weeks after that...

There's not so much that distinguishes the art fair from the contemporary art museum. Both are awash in a palpable paucity of consensus: the art fair is really cool with this; the c-a-museum pretends to not be frightened of it. Both are speaking to whoever will listen: the c-a-museum is also a bit scared of this; the art fair isn't attentive enough to be paying attention. The art fair aims to be the universal-local, the c-a-museum the local-universal.

FAIR:

- The art fair has no illusions about the character of its audience. Its audience remains its equal, if not its superior. Its audience is the person looking at art with no qualifications other than that of her/his/hers cognitive-sensory fields. At the art fair, each viewer is in charge.
- The fair keeps its audience from consensus. It largely *establishes* nothing. It's not a museum survey with intention to sanctify; it's a bazaar, an arcade—a fair. It, at least hypothetically, prevents art from becoming stagnantly approved because it privileges the most sundry of experiences; it fosters circulation.
- The fair welcomes critique because it has nothing to do with critique. It's the exchange of aesthetic(izable) information vis-à-vis money (this transparency of art-and-money is what the museum is armed to deny to the public).

C.A. MUSEUM:

The contemporary art museum assumes the didactic station. It assumes abilities to discern between quality and other-quality. To its credit, it sometimes does a good job of making people see/feel things. To its discredit, it always somehow tells people that they are stupider than it. Museological “quality control” can be helpful, providing focus, editing, and cultics—a prix-fixe menu. But such quality control loses some credibility when juxtaposed with the art fair: the c-a-museum comes to feel like the zoo where the artworks are the people looking at the people which are the animals (which sounds cool in truth, but feels not as cool). At the art fair zoo, the artworks are the fauna, and the people are the people. The museum is good because it’s into quantity-quality quotas, but it ultimately doesn’t understand its audience well enough. It copycats an obsolescing model of quality control defined by art nearly-almost-always meant as art in the #2 and #3 senses.

MARKET VALUE:

The art fair is the marketplace in full display. Our centuries-old bourgeois model of art would not be art without a marketplace. As soon as an artwork changes hands, it becomes a different object: a readymade, a commodity just like any other. The museum’s historical mission has been to foil this. But there’s an elephant in the room: what will our cultural treasures be? Though we share information by the digital megaton, the museum has failed to address this with any cogency. It prefers its default mode of serving #2 and #3 to a 4-D public. Although the art fair may be scrutinized/dismissed as capitalist excess, it does give a sense that cultural information is being circulated rather than programmatically stymied. We no longer loot from rival monarchs or quaintly celebrate our local culture’s rise from medievalism to enlightenment; we think of the globe (even if that globe may very well ruin us).

SUNDAY SCHOOL:

The problem with finding art today: the gospel can be sung by anyone who's in the mood. The museum claims episcopal authority over the gospel but too frequently burps out catechism. Commercial galleries are ultimately little more than tithe collectors. Bienn(i)al(e)s are helmed by Jesuits. NFP art spaces are Puritans. Art fairs are like evangelical sects. The religion of art can be consumed in various ways. Without the Church, there are many sanctuaries, to which each person arrives already informed by any number of pieties or heresies, the constellation of which is unique to shim. And so again we come to that curious temple of identitude, within which the viewer is no different than the maker.

IDENTITUDING:

The art fair warmly thanks identitude for its achievements and then magnanimously forgets everyone's name, leaving identitude with the bill. Art thereby remains in the hands of whoever has deemed it art. The museum tries to charitably outwit this, funding promises of contra-anonymity. But the only thing the museum can offer is itself; all it can do is police identitude, and there's no shortage of crooked cops.

EULOGIES ASIDE:

The art fair is the cruise line of a “global avant-garde.” It’s an identitude expo without an internet connection. It’s also a synecdoche of the artworld itself: a means for money and scholastics to continue to grease the gears of the boondoggle with #2 and #3 behind the wheel. But it’s not a diseased moral body like the c-a-museum, and somehow that deserves to be mentioned.

BUT WAIT, THIS JUST IN:

Contemporary art is the new international language, unifying leading creators across art, music, fashion, film, and design. MOCA TV will be the ultimate digital extension of the museum, aggregating, curating, and generating the strongest artistic content from around the world for a new global audience of people who are engaged in visually oriented culture.

—Jeffrey Deitch

III.

Art Goggles

Art is a good word for IDing things. It's a good packaging device, prescription lens, way to edit the world.

I was just out art-hunting in Antwerp and saw a Rubens altarpiece. Google's reminding me that it's called The Raising of the Cross (or The Elevation of the Cross). I vividly remember(ed) its center panel from my art history survey book (which is weird because I have a terrible visual memory). So it was nice to see this Rubens/art/altarpiece/thing in person while I was floating around Antwerp Cathedral. Rolling over Google images now, I find a caption: "Rubens internalized Italian art and made it his own." OK. I don't care what he did. I love Italian art of the visual tradition to which I assume this caption is referring, but it really doesn't matter, and I'm pretty sure I mean this. Standing in front of the altarpiece, I was entirely moved by the cohesion of the various elements as they portray the human condition. I don't usually like Rubens. I think he's a genius in the wrong place at the wrong time. But this work hit me as stupendous: every single part of it melding seamlessly, or rather with the tension native to what I consider great art. Packaging, lenses, world-editing. Rubens as brand name, art history goggles as liturgy, me at 4 p.m. on 10/3/11. A great work of art.

Mnemonically trotting along: Rembrandt. Whether I'm dissing Rembrandt due to the relatively mediocre quality of the Rembrandts in New York or extolling him after seeing a large body of his mid-to-late work in counterpoint to Caravaggio (who looks like the lesser artist—but of course he died younger) in Amsterdam, I'm still talking about the guy as if he were something real. He is of course something real; Rembrandt is many real things. But standing in front of particular works by this real things, I feel that I'm in the presence of art, while in front of other works by him-them, I'm in the presence of art. These are two different words: art and art. I have allegiance-to/belief-in art that transports me. In the absence of this transport, I remain in the presence of the art I am inextricably aligned with, that is, the annals of sculpture, paintings, and Co.: art history at its most bureaucratic.

So, I'm (unhappily) in league with lesser works by Titian, Chardin, Degas, and Hitchcock. But who watches Hitchcock movies like Jamaica Inn or Topaz? Who reads the early works of Proust or Tolstoy? Analogously, nobody should have a problem requesting that the Met remove half of its Rembrandt paintings (assuming the Met has decent-enough other Dutch 17th-century portraits in storage). Nor should there be any hesitation in saying Bourgeois, Giacometti, and de Kooning are over-esteemed, or that Seth Price and Kelley Walker perpetually miscalculate what art does. People/museums buy names and worship them like they've got the four arms of Vishnu and a Cytherean vagina. Really? Is that the way to handle this stuff? I know that art-and-money are a tight team and often not for the worse, but do we really have

to pretend that a person is the same as his/her/his artworks? People need points of reference and thus names—got that. But artists and art are not the same. Assyrian and Egyptian relics can be art without an artist, and so can street detritus [check out scores of Tumblr blogs].

I seek transport; I'm a transportation junkie. Ways to communicate my highs of late come with names/tags like: Drive, The Philadelphia Story, Loving Cup, The Ambassadors, Black Moon, You Were Always on My Mind. But I don't know the title of the Jordaens painting I saw in Ghent, or of a Böcklin on loan there, or of the Munchs in Oslo [except The Scream, which is a totally different situation], or of that Degas I liked there. I don't know the titles of the two Lari Pittman paintings that may or may not have made an impression on me; I don't know the titles of any Bjarne Melgaard works either, even though I think his work works as art for me. Art, as the term is most commonly regarded, that is as "fine art," is based on names of artists—the maestro's signature. Not to say that I don't know the authors of the above-listed titles, but I also know the titles, and other people do too.

Of note, I also found transportation in/with this authorless jpeg:



Why do I like it? There's (kinda) obviously a sexual element to it. The tongue is an interesting shade of orange which is interesting and I think I'd want to taste it even if I'd prefer to taste it pinker. But that's not the transport I'm talking about. It's the weird nimbus around the disembodied mouth in relation to the arcs of the lips and the oblique color separation behind them that forms the field for transport. The colors are largely hideous to me. The photographic element is fascinating insofar as it captures the detail of human lips and teeth (and, to a lesser extent, the tongue). Blah blah blah. The full image transports me and provides just the right amount of tension to dis-afford me pure pleasure/disgust. Is that oversimplifying things? Is that art? Why am I even writing this and to whom? Am I just trying to defend sauntering amid the complacent and ill-defined orthodoxies which lurk within me?

Point being, does art need names?

And if so, how often?

I'm inclined to consider Google [the search-engine user interface, not the programming, or the company] as art, as some means of [non-vertical] evolutions of being/cognition, and also of tactility when dealing with images. Google subordinates visual aesthetics to cognitive and tactile aesthetics. It's reducible neither to a very broad canvas nor to an epistemological turbine. It's inside-the-cave and outside-the-cave. But is it art? Is Googling like seeing Rubens's altarpiece in Antwerp in the 17th century (assuming that not believing in Christ in the Spanish Netherlands was a rare thing)? Can art have a use-value independent of its status as art? Is the integration of tactile functions integral to the evolution of what art might be? Good questions, Google.

Germanely, Google, in all its modest, impartial affect, helps design/inform identitude. It is a ground on which identitude can properly be identified. It claims to know names and states of public-being, but at the same time claims to know absolutely nothing. Like all omniscient beings, it's everything and nothing.

On Google I'm taken somewhere. It's not the same place the Rubens altarpiece took me. Nor are those places the same as the one George Kuchar's "Temple of Torment" showed me. Even a de Kooning painting took me places of late. All four are windows [and nevermind if they're rectilinearly framed] and/or portals. My claim is that art is nothing but a window/portal. When the window/portal is obscured/occluded, it is hard(er) to see-into/go-into the window/portal. When the window/portal is clear, things are clear: art emerges as a subject. The object of the word art is what I'm struggling with. But flip object and subject around and you arrive at the same thing: when art is clear, art is clear.

I'm scared that my transportation—aka window-shopping, iTinerary—will become closer to psychosis than vacation. With identitude, sharing one's impressions with others becomes less and less tenable. Too many iTineraries to compare, too little time to reflect. Art from the 21st century: millions of memories of what-art-may-have-been in a warehouse too vast/limitless to discover them.



Rosebud

Maybe this points the way to a paradigm shift wherein the romance between one's self and one's nervous system becomes a closed circuit. Sharing—the notion of a public space, the social body—will be outmoded by the autoerotics and homeostasis of sensory prosthetics. Cyborgian plenary. Art turns into a name as rich in spirituality as Ahura Mazda or Jim Jones are to us today.

If Crusoe on his island had the library of Alexandria and a certainty that he should never again see the face of a man, would he ever open a volume?

—John Adams

IV.

Identitude, or life as a readymade

In the beginning there was the Word

Once upon a time, I decided that there was a word art that meant something more to me than many other things. I decided to hunter-gatherer that word down. It remains unclear to me whether I've been good at hunter-gathering. I believe/feel I've succeeded on occasion in communicating art. I believe I am frightened of the world outside of that word, art. "The art is a lonely hunter." I want to discuss a few things, as I'm afraid they must be discussed. Yes, I am afraid, because identity has pampered me and I don't know what lives beyond its pretty forcefield.

Identitude is what happens when people think they are safe to be themselves. We were told that we were special, or could be special, and we ultimately believed it. Or we believed that we were special, and we usually believed it. Ultimately, the job is to speak to people who aren't our friends, isn't it? Or maybe that's where I'm old-fashioned. Maybe identitude simply works in (trans-)friends.

The word art has been co-opted by both egalitarian/ecumenical and elitist identitudinarianism. The egalitarian/ecumenical co-option comes from the doctrine that art(istic creation) is a native practice to all humans—which may be a pleasant way to see things, but is inimical to what art can do, which is, to imbue the commonplace with uncanny geography. The elitist co-option is used to cow people and that's not how art works at its best. Art can be smart and you can be smart, but the two don't necessarily live in the same room; i.e., the world's a scary place and being a person is hard, but don't punish the word art with your self-loathing.

Yes, this is a note to myself whenever remembered.

Art is not a moral category. Art is not an intellectual category. Art is not a political category. Indeed it can masquerade in moral intellectual or political drag, but its efficacy remains in its art, not in its drag. Moral, intellectual, and political approaches open vistas onto things that prove to be art, but that (moment of) art will always eclipse any moral, intellectual, or political aspects it may have.

The state of art criticism: immunity to criticism. Identity comes to insure this. Critical opinion would appear to be outdated on account of some egalitarian/ecumenical scruple about rights to artmaking. Indeed there can be great poetry in omitting opinion, but that demands great poetry. What I see when I see many, many (re)views/voices of art is ways to make friends through the facility of words disseminated (and occasionally read).

Opinion is quite lively in the world. Conversational criticism abounds in clumsy, clumsy-yet-articulate, and articulate ways: it helps people deal with shit. If art and its criticism feel too intelligent to remind people how to deal with shit (which does not mean harping on the conservative elements of the art system or the people system), then what's the point?

In all societies protocol precludes possibilities.
In the art society I discern—a society to which
too many of my contemporaries belong—protocol
indeed does just that.

It feels good to make stuff that feels important,
but it's greater to do something important.
Don't do something to find your place in the
world; do something to remind yourself and
others that the world merits its name. The
world, in all its bounty and indelible fucked-up-
ness, its infinite love and destruction and the
proof of their union.

The world, and art passing through its light and shadows.

If that's too Romantic for you...

There are two ways to deal with being the extant generation of [human] egg and sperm cocktails:

1. Embrace the inheritance
2. Embrace the inheritance

Art has been inherited

PS Christianity is a religion I don't believe in, but it's an excellent trope dispenser, and at its egalitarian core it's an analog of identity. Each is a self-deception easily concealed under its own aegis: eternit(ude) achieved on the site of the ultra-local—the individual. Judgment Day and art[s] history boil down to the same thing: if neither exists, what we are left with is us.

PPS

Do I care? Probably.

Finding art's stuff somewhere else is first and foremost a challenge to myself. I've largely failed thus far. It's also very much a challenge to everyone else. Break the mold, push the envelope, and other righteous clichés. If you love to (use) paint, (use) paint. If you want to call it art, that's your business, but don't piggyback on history's success. Don't tell people you're special, show them.

Just because you go to an art museum, doesn't mean you're looking at art. Simple.

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