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THE
DECADE
SHOW

The Decade Show

Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s

The Decade Show

Dates of the exhibition:

Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art,

May 16 to August 19, 1990

The New Museum of Contemporary Art,

May 12 to August 19, 1990

The Studio Museum in Harlem,

May 18 to August 19, 1990

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From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Deal:

Art Making in the Eighties

LAURA TRIPPI and GARY SANGSTER,
The New Museum of Contemporary Art

Trivial Pursuit® the 1980s: Part I

The Game

The decade had not yet come to a close before the makers of the popular board game *Trivial Pursuit* released a special edition, *Trivial Pursuit The 1980's*. A state-of-the-culture quiz game for the age of information, the original *Trivial Pursuit*, introduced early in the decade, had been the first board game since *Monopoly* to significantly capture an adult market. While the game reached the zenith of its popularity in 1984, when over fifteen million units were sold, it maintained its standing as an entertainment fixture through to the decade's end: "I felt (I admit it) homey," a writer in the *Village Voice* recently confessed, reminiscing about the television series *thirtysomething's* 1987 premiere year, "whenever [in the series] the whole gang gathered at Hope and Michael's to hang out, play *Trivial Pursuit*, and . . . watch TV."¹ As the baby boom generation reinvented the family fold, and young adults enrolled *en masse* in the ranks of the new professional, *Trivial Pursuit* was there, a pastime suited to the retrogressive spirit of the period. "From Gorbachev to *Garfield*," the press release for *The 1980's* edition proclaimed, "from Prince to the *Phantom of the Opera*; the newest game set is a tribute to a tumultuous decade remembered as the Reagan Era."

It may also be remembered as a decade marked by strategic, and often magnificent, lapses of memory; by the sweeping diversionary rhetoric of big business and a deeply conservative administration; by a relentless expansion of the media into previously uncolonized areas — psychic and social, as well as geographic — and a rising tide of news and information. The enormous popularity of *Trivial Pursuit* was a sign of a time in which "having the answer" became an urgent issue. Information itself became a hot commodity, and, more pressing yet, no sense of an underlying narrative structure seemed to be seeping through. The question, raised and begged by the proliferation of facts, was one of cultural coherence. In *The 1980's* edition of *Trivial Pursuit*, subject areas had been altered tellingly from those of the original: "Entertainment" remained "Entertainment," but "History" gave way to "In the News," and "Art and Literature" was supplanted by "That's Life" (a category that included such questions as: "What continent could one out of every five Americans not name a country from in a 1988 Gallup poll?").² Knowledge was reduced to information, history and culture leveled together to the status of arbitrary facts. With the decay of authentic community (once supported by stories of god and progress, of the triumph of science, modernity, or the West), a largely fictive collectivity was promulgated in living rooms

We wish to thank Dierdre Summerbell for her meticulous editing.

1. Stacey D'Erasmus, "To Live and Die in PA," *The Village Voice*, vol. XXXV, no. 7 (February 13, 1990): pp. 59-60, p. 59.

2. The answer is "Europe."

across the land — through television, but also through the playing cards of *Trivial Pursuit*. Emblematic of what Fredric Jameson called a “desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past,” *Trivial Pursuit* was both a tribute to and symptom of that loss of “real” history that characterized the moment we came, in the 1980s, to call postmodernity.³

TRIVIAL PURSUIT: THE 1980'S MASTER GAME

Publicity still
Courtesy of Parker Brothers



Trivial Pursuit® the 1980s: Part II
Reinventing the Beaux-Arts

During the early years of the decade, a concern to establish the priorities and parameters of postmodernism dominated discussion in the field of art. In his preface to the anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, published in 1983, Hal Foster summarized the wide-ranging nature of the debate:

*Postmodernism: does it exist at all and, if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place? How are we to mark its advent? Are we truly beyond the modern, truly in (say) a postindustrial age?*⁴

Among the outlooks offered in the anthology was Craig Owens' “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” which sought to introduce the idea of cultural difference into what he called the “scandalously in-different” discussion of postmodernism:

*[H]owever we choose to diagnose its symptoms, postmodernism is usually treated, by its protagonists and antagonists alike, as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions. . . . [A]t stake. . . is not only the hegemony of Western culture, but also (our sense of) our identity as a culture. These two stakes, however, are so inextricably intertwined . . . that it is possible to speculate that what has toppled our claims to sovereignty is actually the realization that our culture is neither as homogeneous nor as monolithic as we once believed it to be.*⁵

3. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, No. 146 (July-August, 1984): pp. 53-92, p. 66. Jameson is here referring to the prevalence of nostalgia during the period in all varieties of cultural production.

4. Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983): pp. ix-xvi, p. ix.

5. Craig Owens, “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” in Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 57-82, pp. 57-8.

For Owens, postmodernism entails a critique of mastery, an ongoing effort “to upset the reassuring stability” of norms and positions that present themselves as universal and self-evident, but which in fact are culturally specific and serve the interests of a limited few.⁶ Postmodernism, then, seeks to call into question our most fundamental concepts, institutions, and categories — among them, the institutions of art and art history, and, more broadly, the lived concept of identity.

In the realm of popular culture, the game of *Trivial Pursuit* arose in response to an unarticulated urban/suburban crisis in cultural identity. Similarly, E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*, published mid-decade, sought to stave off the crisis by re-entrenching tradition — white, Eurocentric, and masculinist tradition with a capital “T” — through a program mandating what every society member must know. The art world, too, developed its own peculiar symptoms or strategies — techniques, if not for coping with, then for disassembling its “condition.”⁷

Where the seventies, with its emphasis in art on process, concept, and performance over product, had witnessed such an expansion of aesthetic practice that art’s “dematerialization” seemed imminent, this was an era of its institutional retrenchment.⁸ The critic Carter Ratcliff offered a concise view of this development:

Weathering the 1973-74 recession without much trouble, dealers in contemporary art glided to the end of the decade more than ready to cash in on Neo-Expressionism’s ‘return to the figure.’ Galleries . . . boomed and multiplied in the 1980s. New York’s East Village scene invented itself, sprawled, then contracted as a new art neighborhood appeared at the intersection of Broadway and Prince Street. Partly a SoHo annex, partly an economically upward migration from the East Village, this outpost on Lower Broadway does not yet feel permanent. It does look prosperous.⁹

Propelled in part by a growing interest in the investment potential of contemporary art, the eighties were marked by a diversionary return to traditional media and methods. Almost with a vengeance, painting and sculpture reappeared, flourishing under a wide variety of guises, from Neo-Expressionism and Neo-Geo, to Neo-Pop and Commodity art. “[K]now-nothing eclecticism,” Ratcliff wrote elsewhere, mimicking the attitude of critics toward these trends, “careerist maneuvering and a market quickening to reward it; the ascendancy of naive and opportunistic collectors; a slackness that leaves art-world borders open to the encroachments of mere fashion; and, permeating all else. . . hype.”¹⁰ The writings of the French theorist Jean Baudrillard swept like brushfire through the period, both feeding on and fueling a cynicism slack with confusion and ennui. Baudrillard’s vision of contemporary culture as a “precession of simulacra,” as a groundless and constant flow of images which capital has so penetrated that both resistance and reference to the real have been rendered obsolete, was all too easily, if often inadvertently, placed in the service

6. *Ibid.*

7. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

8. On “dematerialization,” see, for example, Lucy Lippard, *The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1967 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in an Expanded Field,” in Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*; Thomas Crow, Martha Rosler, and Craig Owens, “The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art,” and Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and Benjamin Buchloh, “Theories of Art After Minimalism and Pop,” both in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 1 (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1987).

9. Carter Ratcliff, “The Marriage of Art and Money,” *Art in America*, special Art and Money issue, vol. 76, no. 7 (July 1988): pp. 76-147, p. 81.

10. Carter Ratcliff, “Dramatis Personae I,” *Art in America*, vol. 73, no. 9 (September 1985): pp. 9-15, p. 9. “Yet even [these critics’] most passionate assaults,” Ratcliff concluded the essay in his own voice, “leave the institution of ‘the individual artist’ upright and intact.”

of a neoconservative impulse.¹¹ Germano Celant's contribution to the catalogue for the 1982 *Documenta 7* in Kassel, West Germany, offered an example of criticism dizzied by a lack of directional sense and ducking for cover under a Baudrillardian conceit. "No longer concerned with the portrayal of illusions and visual and environmental artifice," Celant wrote:

art and architecture have become illusion and artifice, the unreal and the representational replacing the substantial. . . .

Under the present historical conditions, the only thing left to do is to glorify what does not exist. Art and architecture have proposed a flight into an ideal and abstract realm . . . where language exists in an illusory condition, based on the dazzle and revelations of an already codified culture. We are in full ceremonial swing: what matters is the guise and the power of the image, springing forth from archaic representations as if from the nether world of the dead.¹²

In her contribution to the same catalogue, wryly titled "In the Mist Things Appear Larger," Coosje van Bruggen described the situation more simply: "The placement of art on a pedestal as 'sacred', has apparently been revived."¹³ Correspondingly, the institution of "the individual artist" was also being reinstated, as if the figure of creative genius could anchor this revivalist drift. Busied, then, with its own trivial pursuits, the art world had reinvented the beaux-arts, rallying under a banner that patched "simulation" together with a seriously shopworn notion of "the aesthetic."

Trivial Pursuit® the 1980s: Part III

The Pursuit of the Trivial

During the same period, within those art practices allied with a critical post-modernism, the institution of "the individual" (including, but not limited to, "the individual artist") had come under examination. The notion of a free and sovereign self, autonomous in its interiority, was giving way to an investigation of the manners and methods of its construction. At "The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity," a symposium organized in 1986 by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Stuart Hall proposed a conception of the self formulated according to a "dialogic" linguistic model then gaining wide currency:

Potentially, discourse is endless: the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything in particular, you do have to stop talking. Of course every full stop is provisional. The next sentence will take nearly all of it back. . . . But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am. At a certain point, in a certain discourse, we call these unfinished closures, 'the self,' 'society,' 'politics,' etc.¹⁴

A cornerstone of modern Western aesthetics — with its impressionisms and expres,

11. For Baudrillard, see "The Precession of Simulacra," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York and Boston: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc.): pp. 253-281. The influence of what Hal Foster termed "Baudrillard's Endgame" was so pervasive that a "Forget Baudrillard" exhibition and "Resistance: Anti-Baudrillard" symposium were convened at White Columns Gallery in the winter of 1987. On "Baudrillard's Endgame," see Hal Foster, "For a Concept of the Political in Art," *Art in America* vol. 72, no. 4 (April 1984): pp. 17-25.

12. Germano Celant, "A Visual Machine: Art Installation and its Modern Prototypes," in *Documenta 7*, vol. II (Kassel: 1982): pp. xiii-xvii, p. xiii.

13. Coosje van Bruggen, "In the Mist Things Appear Larger," in *Documenta 7*, vol. II, pp. ix-x, p. ix.

14. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *JCA Documents 6* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987): pp. 44-46, p. 45.

GROUP MATERIAL

DEMOCRACY

November 19 to December 10, 1988

Cultural Participation, Installation at Dia Art

Foundation, New York

Photo: Ken Schles



sionisms, on the one hand, and its ideal of disinterested, universal judgement, on the other — the idea of the autonomous self helped provide a base for the larger edifice of modernity, an edifice built for the benefit of a largely white, largely male few, at the expense of the many. The application of dialogic models to considerations of identity suggested that the self be understood not as an entity but as a provisional construction, a weave of differing dialogic, or discursive, threads:

It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of 'closures' which are required to create communities of identification — nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc — are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political action, whether movements, or parties, or classes, those too, are temporary, partial, arbitrary. It is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all identity is constructed across difference. . . .¹⁵

Not only in theory, but also in and through the practice of art, the notion of "identity" was beginning to be dislodged — or, in some cases, to unravel. Artists such as Dara Birnbaum, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Adrian Piper, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons — those, in other words, whose work has been understood as effecting a critique of representation — had, since the late seventies, investigated and put on display the arbitrary and provisional nature of identity. Their work, often examining the realm of cultural production through a linguistic lens, calls attention to the mechanisms by which selves are produced and reproduced, and emphasizes the ways in which "identity is constructed across difference," whether the diacritical difference be gender, race, or class.

Such artists often turned to photography or other mechanical means of reproduction, photocopying or L.E.D. (Liquid Electronic Display) signboards, for example. In a series of essays that began with "Pictures" in 1977, Douglas Crimp explored the ramifications of photography, a medium only then being admitted into the canon of

15. Ibid.

fine art.¹⁶ Taking his cue, on the one hand, from Walter Benjamin, and, on the other, from the early work of artists such as Sherman and Prince, Crimp elaborated on themes that were to become crucial to the further development of art as a critical practice in the eighties.¹⁷ Among these is photography's capacity to disrupt notions of originality. Because it is by nature a means of mechanical reproduction, photography upset both the idea of the artist's originality and the notion of an original art work in relation to a copy. This is especially clear in the practice of appropriation, where, by photographic means, images are borrowed wholesale. Through the circulation of reproductions, Crimp argued, photography depletes artworks of their "aura," the quasi-sacred emanation of their uniqueness and authenticity. The overturning of conventions tied to authenticity and originality would, in this view, lead to a loosening of the museum's disciplinary (in both senses of the word) grip, suggesting a "dispersal" of art and the museum's impending obsolescence. Finally, Crimp's argument called into question the notion of identity itself: new procedures in photography provided opportunities for a gradual unpacking of "the fiction of the self."¹⁸

Crimp took a dim view of what, as with Benjamin, he called "photography as art," by which he meant the absorption of photographic practice into the institutions of the market and the museum, which is both accomplished through such restraining measures as the limited edition and supported by the resurfaced figure of creative genius installed behind the camera's lens. Arguing against these recuperative trends, Crimp advanced instead "art as photography," that is, photography — with its drastic implications intact — as the paradigmatic medium for vanguard art practices in general.¹⁹

Where the first wave of artists working within this photographic model had primarily employed appropriation or performance-derived references and conventions, by the mid-eighties younger artists such as Alfredo Jaar and Lorna Simpson were adapting other photographic languages to the critical analysis of systems of representation. As the body of work in this area grew, a diversity of approaches seemed allied in a larger project. Artists who employed more traditional media but with an unsettling approach to content — Ida Applebroog, John Coplans, Eric Fischl, Leon Golub, Ben Sakoguchi, Andres Serrano, Nancy Spero, David Wojnarowicz, even Bruce Nauman, especially in his work with neon and video — were also engaged in an exploration of the mechanisms that make up the self. Under the pressure of this varied deployment of images and texts lifted from the stream of social, institutional, and commercial discourse, identity was gradually revealed to be an *effect* of multiple forces, a provisional point of intersection, a stage or site of ongoing exchange and contestation.

Informed by the idea that the self is, itself, an artifact, many artists turned their attention to the commonplace — habits, customs, routine activities — as the carrier of cultural values.²⁰ What was once considered trivial came to be understood as

16. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October 8* (Spring 1979): pp. 75-88; first published in conjunction with an exhibition at Artists Space of the same name (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977). It may be worth recalling that in 1977 the Whitney Biennial included photography for the first time.

17. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), trans. Harry Zohn, in Hanna Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): pp. 217-252; and "A Short History of Photography" (1931), trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Sezres*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 1972): pp. 7-26.

18. Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October 15* (Winter 1980): pp. 92-101, p. 99.

19. Crimp, "Photographic Activity," p. 96. See also Benjamin, "A Short History." Crimp's argument for the paradigmatic role of photography builds on the premise that the "aesthetic mode that was exemplary during the seventies was performance," a point he makes by way of appropriating and turning on its head Michael Fried's notion of "theatricality," introduced in Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" of 1965. See Crimp, "Pictures," p. 77.

decisive in the production and reproduction of selves and social structures. As a result, there emerged a progressive, and deeply strategic, *pursuit of the trivial*, of ordinary places in the social where values are inscribed, which was directed against the essentializing and hierarchical discourse of modernism.

Concerned with art's continued capacity for resistance and intervention, artists often looked to theory, fashioning practice according to the insights gained. Examinations of the conditional and institutional character of the authoritative self sometimes emerged quite pointedly. Martha Rosler's performance, "Watchwords of the Eighties," for example, at *Documenta 7*, was offered as an impromptu response to the neoconservative curatorial aesthetic that she found to be holding sway.²¹ Viewing Rosler's performance as a comment on the preponderance of Neo-Expressionist painting in the exhibition, and, more generally, on the art world's sudden assumption of graffiti art, Benjamin Buchloh wrote:

Her performance, with its self-consciously artificial incorporation of rap talk and graffiti writing, was as specific to contemporary New York culture as the 'real' graffiti painter Lee Quinones, who had been invited by the curators to paint the walls of a subterranean pedestrian passageway. . . . As we see Rosler bouncing around the stage like a street fighter with a ghetto blaster, it is apparent that her notion of authenticity contradicts the art world's desire to acculturate instantly any authentic sign of denial and resistance.²²

Closer to home — in both senses of the phrase — was Sylvia Kolbowski's presentation, in New York, at the first of the Dia Art Discussions in Contemporary Culture in 1987. In this series of panel discussions, the growing importance of the issue of cultural difference, especially as elaborated by feminist inflections of psychoanalytic theory, was very much in evidence. "I would like to define my interest here as something . . . like the acquisition of a place from which to speak," Kolbowski asserted, directly challenging fellow panelists and peers included among the audience:

I find it particularly contradictory when critics or artists who do critical, political work do not seek to undermine — in fact often avoid undermining — the positions of authority from which they themselves speak. Certain institutional discourses . . . are unproblematically used to challenge the insularity and imperviousness of other institutions. . . . [F]ew of the speakers have paid attention to the very ideologies that inform their methods of presenting knowledge. . . .²³

20. On this, see especially Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977, reprint 1986).

21. Where *Documenta 6*, in 1977, had presented video installations by thirteen artists, videotapes by fifty others, and a collaborative satellite video installation by Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, and Douglas Davis, *Documenta 7* offered one video work — contributed by Dara Birnbaum, one of the few women artists participating in the exhibition. At the same time, while *Documenta 6* presented performance pieces from fifteen artists, this thriving genre was represented at *Documenta 7* by only three, including Rosler's unpremeditated piece of guerrilla theatre.

Rudi Fuchs, *Documenta 7's* artistic director, suggested a subtitle for the exhibition: "In which our heroes after a long and strenuous voyage through sinister valleys and dark forests finally arrive in the English Garden, and at the gate of a splendid palace." In other words, having traversed the Dark Ages of the sixties and seventies (when men were still men, an earthwork was a sinister valley, conceptual art was a dark forest, and the ladies presumably looked to their cooking), art at long last entered the eighties Renaissance of representation and the beaux-arts: hence re-entered civilization, after a long travail. Rudi Fuchs, "Introduction," *Documenta 7*, vol. 1, p. xv. Also quoted in Douglas Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition," *October* 30 (Fall 1984): pp. 49-81, p. 49.

22. Benjamin Buchloh, "A Dictionary of Received Ideas," *October* 22 (Fall 1982): pp. 105-126, p. 123.

23. Sylvia Kolbowski, "Legacies of Critical Practice in the 1980s," in Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 1, pp. 99-104, p. 101. On difference, see for example *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985). See also Mary Kelly, "On Representation, Sexuality and Sameness," and Aimee Rankin, "'Difference' and Deference," both in *Screen*, Deconstructing Difference issue, vol. 28, no. 1 (Winter 1987): pp. 102-107; 91-100.

The issue of access — or of its obstruction — to positions from which the “I” might legitimately speak, was the link connecting artists engaged in a critique of representation to those whose primary focus had fallen on the institutions that orchestrate and legitimate “identity.” Artists and artists’ groups such as Robert Colescott, Hans Haacke, Epoxy Art, Group Material, The Guerilla Girls, Louise Lawler, James Luna, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Martha Rosler, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, among others, delineated the lines of power that govern the conventions of the art world, from exhibition practices and gallery representation, to art historical discourse and education, in an effort to disrupt them. Operative ideologies were repeatedly highlighted and contested, recalling Owens’ assertion in “The Discourse of Others”: “Not only does the postmodernist work claim no such authority, it also actively seeks to undermine all such claims.”²⁴

The work of artists in both these groups has, above all, aimed to unsettle the conviction that art exists in an autonomous sphere, free from economic and political interests. More to the point, in the dispersal of art from the hushed and orderly confines of the museum; in the depletion of its auratic qualities; in the substitution, for uniqueness and rarity, of readily available copies; and in the adoption of source material from the vernacular, what we have witnessed is an insistent, and resistant, *trivializing trend*, directed against the aggrandizing and recuperative apparatus of the market and the museum. In exhibitions such as the “Times Square Show” of 1980²⁵; Barbara Kruger’s “Pictures and Promises” at the Kitchen in 1981,²⁶ as well as those organized by Carol Squiers for P.S.1 between 1981-83, with their tear sheets, newsprint, and reproductions taken straight from books, intermingled with artworks and “actual” photographs; and the year-long “Democracy” project mounted at Dia Art Foundation by Group Material and Martha Rosler between 1988-89,²⁷ art has undergone a diminution of sanctity and scale. It has, in the best sense, been *trivialized*, that is — in the spirit of the term’s New Latin derivation — *dispensed to the street*.²⁸

In his essay “An Artistic Agenda,” written in 1988 for the tenth anniversary of the alternative performance and visual art venue, L.A.C.E. (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), the late William Olander — originally a cocurator on THE DECADE SHOW — argued for an extension into the nineties of work committed to “recognizing and promoting the concept that culture can no longer be separated out from other practices but has been dispersed and transferred throughout the social realm.”²⁹ Pausing, however, over the emergence of “a postconceptual practice . . . which is curiously linked to legitimizing commodity production,” Olander in this essay seemed to sense a change in the conditions of possibility for critical art practice. “Much of this work,” he wrote of practices devoted to a critique of the various institutional discourses of art, “is exemplary”:

fulfilling the mandate that is too easily lost sight of as so-called alternatives become more established, more institutional, and more bureaucratic; as they attempt to seek out a new, and larger, aspiring middle-class audience; as they scramble for yet another corporate, foundation, or government dollar. It is dedicated to exposing the false neutrality and

24. Owens, p. 58.

25. See Kim Levin, “The Times Square Show,” in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, no. 1 (September, 1980): pp. 87-9.

26. See Hal Foster, “Subversive Signs,” in *Art in America*, vol. 70, no. 10 (November, 1982): pp. 88-92.

27. See Brian Wallis, ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, and *If You Lived Here . . . The City in Art, Activism, and Theory: A Project by Martha Rosler, Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, vol. 5 and 6 (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1990).

28. *The American Heritage Dictionary, New College Edition*, 1978: trivia, “that which comes from the street.”

*idealism of art and to investigating its body—the museum, the alternative space, the artist-run gallery. As Hal Foster has noted, ‘in order to transform the apparatus, it is necessary to expose its “alibis” and foreground its “framework.”’ Clearly, this has been an instrumental function of much of the most significant art of the 1980s. But what is on the agenda for the 1990s?*²⁹

The Art of the Deal

By the decade’s end, a new, profoundly professionalized aesthetic sensibility was already high on the horizon. As the space of alternative art venues, mapped out in the seventies, was increasingly colonized, and even museums, with their growing appetite for blockbuster shows, adopted the tactics of the entertainment industry, art



Cover of July 1988 issue of *Art in America*
Showing detail of JOSEPH BEUYS'S,
KUNST = KAPITAL
1979
Copyright *Capital Magazine*
(Gruner & Jahr, Hamburg), 1979

came to operate more and more within the terms of the media and the marketplace. While the revivalist drift of the early eighties, in its brazen relations with a young market, may have seemed as silly as the laughably fantastic schemes of a movie-star president, by the late eighties, few in the art world were laughing. One after another resistant device was capitulating to the market, as what Crimp called “the end of painting” appeared to give way to the *end* of the end of painting.³¹ Artists more and more were being absorbed into cults of luster and monumentality. The domination of the field by market forces was cultivating a tendency toward serial production to

29. William Olander, “An Artistic Agenda,” in Karen Moss, ed., *L.A.C.E.: 10 Years Documented* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, 1988): pp. 16-17, p. 16.

30. Olander, p. 16. Foster, *RECODINGS: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1985), pp. 101-102.

31. Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): pp. 69-86.

feed a voracious collecting constituency with brand-name art and knock-offs, while the turn of the seasons was giving rhythm to the variations on a signature style. After the pattern of *Trivial Pursuit*, with its simulation of collective memory by reference to a roster of arbitrary facts, this widespread return to object-making in art seems itself to constitute a *simulation* of aesthetic practice past.

In July of 1988, *Art in America* produced a special "Art and Money" issue, with a detail of Joseph Beuys' *Kunst = Kapital* (*Art = Money*, 1979) heralding the subject from its cover. Inside, Carter Ratcliff, in "The Marriage of Art and Money," argued that "our persistent habit of trying to separate market value from [a]esthetic value is misguided, like the struggle to extricate a picture's function from its form":

*At its most '[a]esthetic,' art as we know it is always 'selling' something — or many things, its own vision of the world first. . . . The two appeals are more than compatible — different aspects of the same invitation to understand, to accept, to buy the work and its meanings, figuratively and literally. . . .*³²

The idea that art was *ever* free of economic interests may be one of the many myths of modernity that vaporized as we crossed the threshold into a postmodern period. Even Clement Greenberg, in his landmark contribution to American formalist criticism, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," acknowledged a "paradox" inhering in the concept of aesthetic purity when he wrote that the avant-garde "has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold" to "an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off."³³ It appears, however, that market forces have recently escalated to such a magnitude that questions of the relation of aesthetic to economic value have shifted into a different register altogether, where familiar frames of reference no longer apply.

In a recent essay, Yves-Alain Bois suggested a way of reframing the dilemma faced by contemporary art, one as provocative as it is surprisingly simple:

If the production of the sixties and seventies was marked by a desire to test the limits of 'museability' (earthworks, conceptual art, etc.), and . . . to escape the modernist enterprise of autonomization of art. . . anyone [now] can notice a definite return to works easily digestible by the museum. . . . [I]f works of art no longer attempt to outdo the museum, it is because it has become structurally impossible. . . . [T]he dialectical pair museum/world has ceased to exist as such. Our world is one which has the potentiality of becoming, in its entirety, a museum. . . . [T]he funerary economy of the museum is today going far beyond the embalming of art works, and has already begun to congeal the totality of our surroundings.³⁴

The notion that the dichotomy museum/world has been rendered obsolete can help bring the predicament of art in the late eighties sharply into focus. Far from worrying the margins of an institution in its demise, contemporary art in this view situates itself, and its various strategies, within a museological frame so extensive it can equally include any number of artifacts — from, in Bois' words, "a Michael Jackson doll to Concorde souvenirs, from a 'Smoking Permitted' sign to a Robert Venturi

32. Ratcliff, "The Marriage of Art and Money," pp. 81, 84.

33. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): pp. 3-21, p. 8.

34. Yves-Alain Bois, "Susan Smith's Archeology" (New York: Margarete Roeder Gallery, 1989): pp. 3-26, p. 9.

chair, from a Ford Taurus. . .” to art objects made (or not made) for collection and display.³⁵

Bois, however, dismissed the argument of a “renewed submission, on the part of artists, to the diktats of the market.”³⁶ Instead of looking to character analysis, he sought to locate the “cause” of the quandry in contemporary art at “a deeper level.”³⁷ This collapse of the museum/world opposition thus serves to de-psychologize the field, enabling a view of the art world’s altered condition in terms of institutional functions or roles. Carter Ratcliff, too, recently challenged the transgressive model in which art aims to outdo the museum. Arguing that “[t]o find an audience, [art] generally not only makes its peace with art world institutions but actively collaborates with them,” he offered an account emphasizing the reciprocity of institutional roles:

I believe that art as we know it — art as construed by the institutions of the art world — is capable of representing in an effective way only one institution, that of the artist’s public self. . . . I mean something thoroughly outward: an institution similar in many ways to the entity known as the corporation, a non-person that bears a person’s name but for the sake of clarity must never be confused with that person. We ought to take it as axiomatic that every artist who has come to our attention is, to some degree, an institutional figure. When an artist achieves institutional status his or her self aggrandizes its scale and takes on the impersonality of an emblem. This institutional version of the self still displays characteristic personal traits, but they are now formulized, even conceptualized. In this incarnation, the artist finds that he or she can deal with a museum or gallery as one institution to another — that is, from a position that permits at least the hope of equality.³⁸

In Ratcliff’s picture of the artistic self as comparable to a corporation, identity appears as an effect, or articulation, of the play of power relations. Even as this self “aggrandizes its scale,” it undergoes a process of demystification as the locus of its authority is transferred from the quasi-sacred precincts of creative genius to transactions, agreements, and business or curatorial arrangements. Observing that “[f]antasies of escape from the imperatives of institutional power are artifacts peculiar to our culture,” Ratcliff suggests that a remnant of the ideal of individualism has continued to haunt even critical practices in the eighties that sought to undo the exclusionary effects of institutional art operations.³⁹

Instead of moralizing over character flaws in key players, these readings of events remains attentive to the critique of the notion of the free individual which has formed a major part of artistic and critical efforts during the last decade.⁴⁰ Similarly, in “pluralism,” another key motif of the period, a denial of the imperatives of power relations was often lurking, for, as Crimp has noted, pluralism “is the fantasy that art is free, free of other discourses, institutions, free, above all, of history.”⁴¹ By the decade’s close, fantasies of escape had grown insupportable as the space of Olander’s

35. Bois, p. 10. His reference in this passage is to Patricia Leigh Brown, “Collecting the Eighties: Stash the Swatch; Keep the Kettle,” *The New York Times*, Section C (Home), December 15, 1988, an article which asked various members of “the culture industry” to identify key collectibles of the 1980s.

36. Bois, p. 9.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Carter Ratcliff, “Longo’s Logos,” in *Artforum*, vol. xxviii, no. 5 (January 1990): pp. 105-110, pp. 108, 105-106.

39. Ratcliff, “Longo’s Logos,” p. 108.

40. On this, see Ratcliff, “Dramatis Personae, Part II: The Scheherazade Tactic,” *Art in America* Vol. 73, No. 10, (October 1985): pp. 9-13, pp. 11-13.

41. Crimp, “Photographic Activity,” p. 91.

"so-called alternatives" was squeezed out and the strings attached to sponsorship grew tighter by the day. Increasingly, it became clear that the authority of artists, and the viability of spaces for art and exhibition practices critical of or simply different from dominant culture, must rely on an ability to maneuver within the web of institutional discourse.

Noting that the museum under modernism "had as one of its main purposes an entrenchment against the commodification of all things," Bois' analysis otherwise left the question of the relation — more specifically, the *changed* relation — between the market and the museum regrettably undeveloped.⁴² In contrast to the modern model, it now seems that the market is assimilating even the museum. Insinuating itself through collecting practices, the market has begun to dictate to the institutions of art a new outlook, one that alters the idea of historical importance. Shaped by liquidity and volatility, it is a notion of history on a future's market model. Writing in *Art in America's* "Art and Money" issue on the implications for aesthetic culture of the spectacular art auctions of the late eighties, Douglas Davies pointed out a shift in the balance of authority between the museum and auction sales:

*If Pop art fades, Minimal art rises to replace it; if Neo-Expressionism pales, Neo-Geo is discovered to maintain the pace and breath. The barely dry paintings by Tansey, Halley and Philip Taaffe that sold at Christie's for large sums in May [1988] surely set another record for auction speed, but the concept of immediate history is implicit in virtually every step taken by the new marketing system since the end of World War II. Having learned at the feet of museums eager to embrace the next evolution, collectors no longer feel the necessity to wait for the green light. Auction purchase itself now confers validation.*⁴³

If museums once provided the model for collecting as an historical discourse, it is now collecting, both private and corporate and operating at a speed determined by market forces, that is setting the collecting agenda for museums. Neither the museum's concept of history, concretized in collecting practices, nor its historical role, is likely to be left unscathed.

The increased visibility and volatility of auction sales illustrates the extent to which the relationship between art objects and economic value has been altered. New York Times economics reporter Peter Passell recently referred to this development as "the most fundamental change in the market in recent years: the transformation of art into a practical vehicle for investment."⁴⁴ In a cover story for the *Times's* "Arts and Leisure" section, Passell spelled out the ways in which art "collecting" has become an investment game:

Increased competition among dealers, auction houses and innovative marketing outlets has sharply reduced the costs of buying and selling art. Sources of information about the market value of art have multiplied, making it far more attractive for newcomers to play the investing game. And these signs of increased efficiency are not limited to the upper reaches of the art world. . . . It is now becoming practical for individuals with, say, \$10,000 to

42. Bois, p. 22. Having made this observation, Bois concludes by saying that "[t]oday, the museum has itself become a model for the world" without addressing what alteration in the relationship of the terms museum/market — or for that matter, world/market — has necessarily already taken place (p. 22). His museum, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to Baudrillard's "Precession of Simulacra" when Bois writes of the "fetishistic transfiguration [of objects] into simulacra, into sheer signs of themselves" (p. 21).

43. Douglas Davies, "The Billion Dollar Picture?" in *Art in America*, vol. 76, no. 7, special Art and Money issue (July 1988): pp. 21-23, p. 23.


44. Peter Passell, "Van Gogh, Meet Adam Smith," Arts and Leisure Section, *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 4, 1990, p. 1.

*\$50,000 available, to invest in art the way they invest in gold coins or building lots. . . , for individuals and corporations to buy and sell paintings like diamonds or shares in mutual funds.*⁴⁵

Underscoring the extent to which this transformation affects contemporary art in particular, a graph contrasting returns on "hypothetical investment pools" of paintings in four categories accompanied Passell's article. Where a \$20,000 outlay for a parcel of Old Masters in 1980 might have been expected to return a little over \$60,000 in 1989, a comparable investment in contemporary painting could have yielded an astounding \$160,000. The rapid buying and selling of art, once considered unseemly, grew to be accepted practice as profits rose. Art collecting in the late eighties became, in a word, a futures market, where trading or circulation superseded accumulation or collecting on the model initially provided by the modern museum.

The emergence of a trader's market for art would seem to place museums at serious risk, economically unable, as they are, to compete with other bidders. As a result, it appears that it will be, ironically, through the mechanism of the market that art's looked-for dispersal is likely to be effected. Such a dispersal, however, does not necessarily lead to the museum's demise. Instead, Passell's "transformation of art into a practical vehicle for investment" entails a reciprocal transformation of the institutions that have grown with art in the modern period. As the museum's role in "writing" history is put under pressure from market forces, its attitude toward that role is being tested. If it is challenged by the market to take up an *interested* posture toward the present, the nature of that interest is nonetheless open to interpretation. As artworks increasingly pass into and through private and corporate collections, and government support for the arts continues to diminish, responsible *brokerage* would seem to have an ever more prominent part to play. The November 1989 "Day Without Art," sponsored by Visual AIDS, in which art institutions across the country "demonstrated" against government and media inaction and disinformation regarding AIDS, represents one way in which resistant brokerage might operate from within the institutions of art to articulate opposition, and engage directly with history, that is with the history of the present moment.

Artists themselves have been quick to recognize these changes in the field, and to exploit or explore them. Commodity artists, for example, such as Haim Steinbach, trade on the functional transformation of the art object, while Komar and Melamid, with their ironic, neo-Soviet realist celebration of Bayonne, New Jersey, mount the conceptual spectacle of the Artist in the Age of Late Capitalism. Others, Martin Puryear, for example, forge hybrid forms that, in the guise of high modernism, smuggle onto the (so-called) international market the ghostly traces of traditions cannibalized by or excluded from the canons of Western art. In addition to these procedures, Gran Fury's controversial demonstrations and poster project interventions; Group Material's emphasis on opening exhibition practices to include all manner of cultural production; David Hammons's argumentative site-specific installations; the educative and interventionist aspect of Tim Rollins and K.O.S., whose Art and Knowledge Workshop in the Bronx effectively includes an apprenticeship in marketing otherwise reserved to such elite training grounds as CalArts and Yale — with these artists and artists' groups, the identity of art has been dispersed into an array of strategies, stances, and practices. Such work demonstrates the vitality of a critical art tradition, articulated in terms that challenge the authority of the art object,



NELSON SAVINON and
GEORGE GARCES of
TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S.
1989
Art and Knowledge Workshop, Bronx, New York

45. Passell, pp. 1, 12.

the individual artist, and the institutions of art, as we move into the century's last decade.

If the return to object-making in art marked the onset of an era of simulation, it also signaled a moment when the cumulative cultural impact of new technologies began to register within the artistic arena. Computers and video, synthesizers and laser discs, technologies for the production and reproduction of images, sounds, environments, and a variety of special effects, have the effect of installing in our conceptual frame a new visual and experiential paradigm, one that has increasingly been investigated by artists. This technological paradigm does not invalidate so much as intensify, augment, and embellish the model provided earlier by photography. In her essay "On Artificiality," published in *Flash Art* in 1982, Kate Linker addressed the need to reformulate that Benjaminian photographic model in consideration of both the *theory* of a "fictive, fabricated world" determined by "rampant and multiple technology," and the *fact* of a flourishing body of work by "artists who variously manipulate and synthesize images":

Indeed, this glossy object world suggests a situation in which both creator and copyist have been replaced by the more complex role of the arranger who, working with sophisticated technology and under a post-industrial model, 'manages' the production of imagery. For the cult of the artificial does not correspond to the mere existence of advanced technologies; it reflects their wide availability, and the new social relations . . . that are afforded with increased access.⁴⁶

Linker's figure of the artist as "arranger" provides a critical avenue into the field of disparate practices that make up contemporary art. Aggressively synthetic picture-making practices can be understood as motivated "by a desire to move closer to the realities of material production" and as "aiming to negotiate a relation with consumer culture as it increasingly dominates the urban vernacular."⁴⁷ The model might also be extended to approaches to object-making that investigate art's "other" border regions, zones of collision and intersection that comprise our increasingly imploding culture. Finally, Linker's model might equally describe the shift of aesthetic interest away from object-making, to the orchestration and circulation of bodies of work, and to the staging of events, exhibitions, and even careers, which came to the fore in the later part of the decade. Artists have lately evidenced a concern with managing *both* "the production of imagery," *and* the production and distribution of art itself, "arranging" art as commodity, event, institution, and information. From "the end of painting" to "A Day Without Art," the eighties traced a trajectory in which the strategies involved in the "making" of art multiplied in both complexity and kind as, daily, the stakes and wagers were raised.

The appeal of Baudrillard seems to have been his ability to capture, in subtleties of terminology and style, the enormity of the transformations in the mechanisms of cultural production and reproduction, and, correspondingly, the profound alteration of the self in relation to its objects:

[P]eople no longer project themselves into their objects. . . : the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished, and even if it can always be marked out in detail, one feels that it is not

46. Kate Linker, "On Artificiality," *Flash Art*, No. 112 (May 1983): pp. 33-35, pp. 34-35. On simulation, see also Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America*, vol. 74, no. 6, (June 1986): pp. 80-139.

47. Linker, p. 35.

*really there that things are being played out. . . . [L]ittle by little a logic of 'driving' has replaced a very subjective logic of possession and projection. No more fantasies of power, speed, and appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tactic of potentialities linked to usage. . . . an optimization of the play of possibilities.*⁴⁸

With this evaporation of the psychological dimension, distinctions between self and object, private and public space, are abolished together, collapsing into "a single dimension" of communication and information.⁴⁹ As "forms of expression" disappear, "forms of risk and vertigo" come to predominate.⁵⁰ Pried loose from the logic of possession and accumulation, it seems that the art of unique object-making will have been superceded by the art of arrangement, distribution, and circulation, that is, by the art of the deal.

At the decade's end, a new adult board game was in the ascendancy. Developed (unlike *Trivial Pursuit*) by industry professionals, *Trump The Game* was a spinoff of real-estate magnate Donald Trump's bestselling autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*, from which the game box borrows its cover graphics and slogan: "It's not whether you win or lose, but whether you win!" Where the rules of play for *Trivial Pursuit* are almost idiotically simple, *Trump the Game's* are nuanced and complex. The rule book runs for 11 pages, dividing play into distinct but unequal phases of buying and dealing. Acquisition, in other words, is not the primary goal: the heart of the game is the art of the deal.

"Live the fantasy! Feel the power! Make the deals!" the glossy rule book urges. In the words of one reviewer, *Trump The Game* "has a pleasant fantasy aspect and a cohesiveness that draws players in. . . ."⁵¹ Trump himself, they say, was more interested in developing marketing strategies for the game than with its design.⁵²

48. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," trans. John Johnston, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 126-134, p. 127.

49. Baudrillard, p. 131.

50. Baudrillard, p. 132.

51. Delia O'Hara, "'Trump' fulfills richest fantasies," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 11, 1989, p. 13.

52. Gregory Sandler, "Milton Bradley's Golden Goose," *Business West*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 1989), p. 7.

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY HISPANIC ART

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