

HOUSE ORGAN

A Tale of Two Museums

May 2006—New York’s Frick Museum may be found at Fifth Avenue and 70th Street. Its Whitney Museum of American Art is a mere six blocks away, at Madison Avenue and 75th Street. Both institutions are display cases for the humanizing impulses of the ruling class. Beyond this point, the presentations of the two museums instructively diverge.

The Frick has a concentration of beauty that makes a visitor gasp—and appreciate the privileged position of New York City within the United States, for there are at least twenty works in its collection unmatched in the whole of the country West of the Mississippi. High art, of course, is not homogeneously distributed, neither by class, time, nor place. Frick bought his collection with wealth extracted from brutal exploitation of immigrant labor in his steel mills: Italians from the land that produced Duccio di Buoninsegna, Piero della Francesca, Titian, and Giovanni Bellini, Germans from where hailed Hans Memling, Greeks from the ancestral home of El Greco, and Spaniards who shared a national origin with Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, whose image of three workers at a forge will always have pride of place in this Frick visitor’s heart.

Mr. Frick was not a nice man, but a lucky one. Happily for him, though not for his workers—whose strike at the Homestead Steel Mill he was in process of breaking with 300 murderous Pinkertons at the time—Frick was able to survive the attempt on his life made by Alexander Berkman in 1892. Frick lived on, accumulating and accumulating, while Berkman moldered in prison for fourteen years. By the time Sasha Berkman was released, his quarry had moved from Pittsburg to Fifth and 70th, with a fine view of Central Park and the space he needed to show off his acquisitions. Frick was doubly fortunate. Not only did he survive to accumulate, his entry onto the art market occurred at that delectable moment when the rising elites of one society became able to buy out the declining assets of others. Aided by the very high-priced immigrant labor of the connoisseur Bernard Berenson, Frick seized the opportunity. He plucked many “priceless” examples of European art and brought them to his home, where today the great museum that bears his name stands. Thus did the moment when American capital was most directed toward the industrial transformation of nature give rise to looting both gross and refined.

Six blocks away, the Whitney is engaged in its Biennial exposition. Founded in 1931, the museum also took the name of its patron, the remarkable Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Of immaculate pedigree and fabulous wealth, Gertrude was Frick’s polar opposite, a passionate rebel who wanted a museum where politically committed art could be shown. The museum’s website insists that she “favored the art of the revolutionary artists derisively called the Ashcan School.” One can think of them—the names of John Sloan, Reginald Marsh and George Bellows stand out—as grandchildren of Goya: artists who depicted an unsentimental dignity in the lives of working people. James Agee was to capture the notion in the title, drawn from Ecclesiasticus, of his great 1941 study of the lives of sharecroppers (co-authored with Walker Evans): *Let us now praise famous men*.

The first Whitney Biennial was held in 1932. This year's version features 100 artists, no longer exclusively American (globalization having been given its due), some individual, some collective, some fictive, and presenting all in all a bewildering array of works. There is Richard Serra's ferocious oil stick rendition of the infamous photograph of a hooded and robed Abu Ghraib prisoner teetering on the verge of electrocution; Liz Larner's "RWBs," a spaghetti-like jumble of "Aluminum tubing, batting, fabric, ribbons, wire rope, padlocks and keys," in red, white and blue, which "teems with associations to American culture"; the [fictive] Reena Spauldings's "deliberately badly painted" images of money, a "parallel with Marx's description of money as a 'real abstraction'"; and Francesco Vezzoli's lurid remake of the trailer to Tinto Brass's X-rated 1979 chestnut, *Caligula* (screenplay by Gore Vidal), this one more authentically pornographic. It is safe to say that if we went all the way through the list, it would be no easier to find a pattern or unity to the pieces exhibited in the Biennial beyond the fact that they are called "art" and deemed important by the art world.

Of course, the works in the Frick are also called "art" and deemed important by the art world. But the difference is profound. I am not referring to imponderable notions of quality or greatness, though no one would disagree that the Frick overflows with "great works." But if Piero della Francesca's monumental and hieratic St. John the Baptist is great, so is Serra's raging against the monstrosity signified by "Bush." Nor does it matter, except subjectively, that I found about half of the work in the Biennial trivial and banal. This is assuredly my right to do, but scarcely weighs in the balance of things—and anyhow, I also find the works of Gainsborough and Reynolds, of whom Mr. Frick seems to have been very fond, trivial and banal, and those of Paolo Veronese, who is the subject of a special Frick exhibition, ponderous and overwrought. In any case, the Biennial is a selection from the present moment in art and offers a kind of snapshot of what is deemed relevant in the here and now, while the Frick represents the "A" list of Western art over six centuries as culled by wealth at a particularly fortuitous time. No doubt, a "Biennial" held in 14th century Siena would have included some mediocre work, as I'm sure was the case for the first Whitney Biennial back in 1932.

There would, however, have been one very large difference between all previous art and its condition over the last twenty years or so: the artists, whether in 1932 New York or 1332 Siena, or of any other epoch, would, no matter how great, good, fair or indifferent, have had a coherent sense of their vocation—not as a matter of skill, but of larger purpose. They would have known who they were as artists, and in whose name. For most of history this latter could be called God, or more to the point, His representatives in the Church. But the humanism that gradually supplanted the theocentric worldview (and is manifest at the Frick in a splendid succession from Memling to Holbein, Breughel, Vermeer, Hals, Rembrandt and Goya), was equally coherent, because it was predicated on an integral conception of human being. Such a notion persisted into the 20th century, and indeed, characterized the radicals of the Ashcan School and the Whitney's early years. "Ordinary" people by these lights are never ordinary. To "praise famous men," when the subjects in question are sharecroppers, housemaids, even hoboes, means the recognition of some transcendent principle in a living being irrespective of that individual's external attributes, possessions, or place in the social hierarchy. I say, living *being*, and not person, because the principle extends to all creatures, and nature as such. This is, I would think, the unifying spirit that gives rise to the aesthetic sense throughout human history up to the late 20th century. It is a unity-in-diversity, or integrality, the drawing of form out of chaos, that gives

an artist identity, whether that artist is depicting the real, abstracting from it, seeing it in relation to the divine, or, like Goya, fiercely displaying the evil and monstrosity of the world. The significance of art depends upon the artist's occupation of a place within his or her time, from which reality can be represented as an intelligible pattern; thus art entails a reworking of the historically given world using a perspective derived from that world yet also transformative of it. Putting it in one word—though a word that can never be fully grasped—the role of the artist has been to give form to truth.

Hacks and geniuses have always coexisted. But until very recently, they could make mutual sense of what they were doing. Their efforts were codified by canon, institutionally grounded in coherent systems of patronage, and produced under the tutelage of “masters” who passed on the tradition. When the stream of Western art began to break up in the 19th century, it did so into recognizable currents, schools like the “Ashcan” artists, often called one kind of “ism” or another. Under these rubrics identifiable groups of artists could communicate about what they were doing, sustained by belief in an integral reality which it was their vocation to represent. Even the surrealists and the Dadaists, who represented reality as beyond the rules of conscious reason, were by that token joining in a great debate whose presupposition was that there is an identifiable reality worth struggling to represent.

As the 20th century drew to a close, it became apparent that this could no longer be taken as a given. One would not expect the Director of the first Whitney Biennial, much less the “Siena Biennial,” to complain, as did Adam Weinberg, the present Director, at the beginning of his introduction to the Biennial's catalogue, that “Today's artistic situation is highly complex, contradictory, and confusing. It is an environment few can make sense of.” Or as the *New York Times* chimed in for a concurrent exhibition of contemporary art, “Critics, curators, gallery owners and historians will filter out most of it in their continuing efforts to discover some meaningful direction, but no one really has a clear view of the big picture. It is too broad, hazy and confusing.” This can only be the case if the intelligibility of the world has broken down, and the question of its “big picture” is no longer considered interesting. And when the world is no longer considered intelligible, the notion of “truth” disintegrates.

While the question of a “worldview” is not a simple projection of the kind of society within which culture is articulated, it is nonetheless expressive of the fundamental structures on which the artist stands. Classless, “original” societies represented reality as a fluid plenum in which humanity and nature interact in perpetual becoming. Hieratic pre-modern states posited the real as an unchanging Parmenidean substance subject to a “Great Chain of Being.” Renaissance humanism and the modernity that ensued differentiated the human from nature and restored a notion of becoming; this, moreover, was increasingly seen as a function of transforming the social order itself, which became subjected to the withering eye of critique. Artists were frequently regarded as agents of that critique. This carried over into the breaking up of traditional worldviews in the names of the “isms” of “modern art,” undertaken as a multiplicity of transformative practices whose goal was to offer a perspective from and through which the world could be re-envisioned—and remade. In this respect, art was not just a process of representing the world; it entailed, rather, an element of the visionary. It was, as Blake had put it, a seeing not with, but through, the eye.

For this multiplicity to have broken down into a chaos of perspectives signifies a relinquishing of the notion that the world can be transformed. It is not therefore, as the man from the *Times* writes, that the big picture “is too broad, hazy and confusing,” but that hopes of negating its relations of power have been suppressed. This concedes the world to the dominant power of capital. And since the “order” imposed by capital is a regime of ceaseless change, change itself loses the quality of becoming or emerging, and takes on the character of chaos.

Art in the times of Henry Frick and Gertrude Whitney was also under the dominion of capital, but capital then and capital now were not quite the same. Capital gave Frick and Whitney the wealth to acquire objects already deemed beautiful; in that respect they were, like all individual patrons back to the Medici’s, the beneficiaries and disposers of social surplus. But the mode of production that generated that wealth had only begun to enter into the makings of the art objects themselves by the time the Whitney’s collection began.

For the story behind this we need to turn to Marx’s youthful insights into the profound deterritorialization expressed in the oncoming bourgeois era, the “all that is solid [which] melts into air” that is the true sign of capital and tells of the fate of culture over the past two centuries. The *Communist Manifesto* announces modernism as a continual challenging of tradition (and is also one of modernism’s prime examples). The advent of “Modern Art” is often located in Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, in which the artist displaced the bourgeois frame of reference by rendering it into a remake of Giorgione’s *Fête Champêtre*. Manet thereby confronted each period with the other, and challenged what had seemed to be an orderly flow of painterly tradition.

Once we grasp the full meaning of capital, however, modernity itself becomes transitional. The *questioning* of tradition announces a reaction to capital’s unsettling presence; but capital’s reign is truly established with the loss of the place upon which the questioner can stand. Once deterritorialization reaches this level, then questioning itself dissolves into the postmodern soup, and the art world cracks up like a smashed mirror.

A fuller understanding is given in the opening pages of *Capital*, published in 1867, the year Manet first exhibited *Le Déjeuner* under that name (the work was actually completed in 1863) at an exhibition challenging the established canons of art. Marx points out that the two forms of value embedded in the commodity are radically incommensurable, and that:

the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values. Within the exchange relation, one use-value is worth just as much as another, provided only that it is present in the appropriate quantity. . . . As use-values, commodities differ, above all, in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity, and therefore do not contain an atom of use-value.

Capital is intrinsically conflictual, and its class struggle is played out within the commodity as well as between fractions of society. As the external struggle turned against the direct producers, the internal relations of the commodity-form took shape as an ascendancy of exchange over use and spread throughout society, becoming fully expressed in the moment when history could no longer be extended into a future beyond capital. This was proclaimed by Margaret Thatcher as the epoch of “TINA,” a timeless time with the unending set of variations that “there is no alternative” to capital and its regime of value

(whose manifestation is exchange-value). Now all that is solid—use-values, sensuous qualities, concrete labor, humanity and nature as organically continuous, the Commons and its community of producers—had indeed melted into the air comprised by exchange, that is, pure market relations under the dominion of value, abstraction and abstract labor, and the “icy waters of egotistical calculation.” Thatcher infamously continued her paean to bourgeois hegemony with the claim that society itself no longer existed. It was Karl Polanyi’s Great Transformation as endgame, announcing that the economy, once embedded within society, now loomed over society, which became its plaything, a mere stage upon which market relations could be enacted.

There are negative numbers within the realm of exchange, but these are mere transfers of value from one column to another, and not negations. Negation is a notion of transformation, and not transfer. It belongs to the material, sensuous, use-valued world. And so the ascendancy of abstracting capital became the loss of negating elements within the real, and hence the eclipse of dialectic. It eventuates in a *Zietgeist* of indifference to questions of transformation, which means, of reality taken seriously at the level of the whole. And it has devastating impact on the art world, summarized in the name of postmodernism.

One can speak of a loss of the object itself under capitalist conditions, and hence, under postmodernism as well, inasmuch as art is a transforming of objects. Nature, needless to say, continues to be appropriated in some fashion by every person, including artists and the patrons of art, from life’s beginning to its end. But these appropriations are for various intimate moments, that is, their public and collective appropriation are denied except as mediated by exchange. Capital seals Blake’s “doors of perception,” it turns things into fetishes, and nature into objects of technical manipulation. Though its economy has not yet succeeded in converting the whole world into commodities, the reigning ideology has well established the notion that the only true form of being is the commodity form. Whatever is not yet a commodity is seen as of lower value. It awaits conversion to the commodity form in order to become “really real.” And nothing is to be legitimately enjoyed unless it is also for sale. These changes tear apart the firmament within which art is made and realized.

Many traditional societies were regulated by gift giving, and art was a gift for the glory of all and functioned to celebrate as well as regulate collective life. The citizens of Siena would organize great festivals when their master-artists like Duccio (whose exquisite painting of *The Temptation of Christ upon the Mountain* adorns the Frick) completed a work, the makings of which everyone followed day by day. This collective function became whittled down over the centuries as aristocratic and early bourgeois patronage replaced a communal relation to art with individualized ownership. The effect accelerated as capital, which is the ever-invading destroyer of community, had its way, and culminated in the relentless cult of the new that has dominated the society of consumption and spectacle after the midpoint of the 20th century.

Consumerism tears apart the bonds that hold life together. It is the immediate weapon that destroys the individuality of every object. Mountains of garbage are one manifestation of this; the transformation of cultural production is another. Capital cannot but overproduce, and fears of underconsumption crises drive its obsession with force-feeding commodities down the collective throat of humanity. In the process—which from another angle is the actual making of the ecological crisis—all coherent value positions are

torn apart and recycled as something other than what they are. Thus consumerism entails the full subordination of use to exchange, of quality to quantity, and of the concrete to the abstract. Under these circumstances the artist is shredded from the community and becomes the plaything of fashion, its dancing bear. Schools of art, indeed, any coherent system of critique, suffer the same fate as other trends. Like commodities in general, they have an ever-waning half-life of relevance and are hauled to the dump in rapidly diminishing intervals. Soon enough, people lose interest in them and passively accept the entertainment value of the given order.

As use-value is lost and the object is dedifferentiated into networks of exchange, an inexorable shift occurs in the nature of artistic production. From celebrating god or nature, or revealing the truth of humanity or its search for justice, the artist's vocation turns inward, into endless reflection on the process of making art, and toward the artist's relation to patronage and museums. This tends to remove art from the world, and the artist from the struggles of our time, but it is the only sure way the demand for innovation can be met. It also tends to remove the artist, period. Under the ruthless pressure of narcissism, the self of the artist is both inflamed and dissolved. Eventually we arrive at the fictive artists—and fictive curators—in the Biennial, the phantom Reena Spaulding and, from its catalogue, “curator” Toni Burlap, who “writes”:

In this system, everything is for sale, if only you can pay the price; but everything is already sold. We might be facing a situation where art has moved beyond aesthetic pleasure and financial speculation to eventually become the only path to social distinction. Tell me what you bought, where, when, and for how much, and I'll tell you who you are. But the answer might be, as Todd Norsten proclaims in one of his toxic paintings, “Fuck you, I can afford it.”

True enough, but scarcely what Goya had to put up with, much less, Piero. No doubt, such a social field opens the way for all kinds of opportunists and artistic fakes (I make no claim in this respect about Todd Norsten, who may or may not exist so far as I know). But we can scarcely blame the artist for being subjected to social relations over whose origin he or she has had no control. If we do not like the results, then the point is not to scold artists but to change these relations. That the terrain of art, like that of politics, is radically different today from even a generation ago, is cause for neither regret nor celebration. After all, if things were so much better in the good old days, how did we get into the present fix? The sense of ecstasy evoked by many works shown in the Frick is cause for gratitude, not nostalgia, for the times through which those artists lived were no less trying, albeit in different ways, than our own. Goya's depictions of war (shown chiefly in Madrid's Prado) are unsurpassable (though Serra stands in the same frame); they show; however, that war was just as much the ruination of the human spirit when fought under Napoleonic conditions as it is under those applied by Rumsfeld.

Now as then, the touchstone for the artist is to contend with an historically emergent reality and to represent it as transformatively as can be done under the given circumstances. We make history, but not as we please, to refer to Marx once more. If the cancerous spread of the value form is what drags down the world today, then the obligation of the artist, masterless but not rudderless, is to find forms of representation that can transcend the value form—and if the art world cannot accept this, well, to hell with it. I cannot finish this essay without referring to the efforts of one artist to do so. Max Schumann (who happens to be a

friend) is a superb, fluid painter who has developed the method of “cheap art,” art on corrugated cardboard with the price tag painted in one corner, mocking commodification itself. In a recent series, Schumann painted an identical series of images—mocking as well, the epoch of “mechanical reproduction.” But he goes further, for each image does differ from another, not however in the object represented nor in the quality of the work, but in the price painted in white in its lower right-hand corner. The customer can pay \$50 up to \$1000 for the same “use-value,” except that each use-value is accented with an arbitrary exchange-value. Heaven forbid—why, the whole order of things would come crashing down if we took this seriously.

—Joel Kovel