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On Malls, Museums, and the Art World: Postmodernism and the Vicissitudes of Consumer Culture

Babette E. Babich

Postmodernism and the Future of Art

By now it is clear that the postmodern has a certain currency for art critics and theorists, social analysts, and political and literary theorists, not to mention journalists and philosophers. But Charles Jencks complains that with respect to architecture, critics apply the term as a kind of catch-all, so that postmodernism is used for "everything that was different from high modernism, and usually this meant skyscrapers with funny shapes, brash colors, and exposed technology." Yet if Jencks himself, who has no scruples about using a term he helped to popularize, finds it necessary to warn against the imprecision of those critics who seem to have "just adopted a current phrase for discontinuity and lumped every departure under it," it is plain that the word postmodern also works as a red flag for the defenders of tradition and traditional usage.

However the term postmodern is expressed—via various suffices, majuscules, hyphenation or whatever, as, e.g., postmodernity, postmodernism, postMODERN, POST-modern, the less and less fashionable post-modern, the briefly efflorescent hypermodern or the tacit continuation of the provenance/inescapability of the term in the limply ironic post-postmodern—the very word seems to irritate thinkers and critics. Despite the recalcitrant vitality of a term in use for nearly a hundred years according to a variety of historical tracings and a concept Umberto Eco claims may be discerned even in classical authors, in spite of the referentiality of the postmodern to the old ideal of the modern which coimplicates the (ever new) modern, academic writers on the arts (particularly [analytic] philosophers), continue to refuse the idea of the postmodern as hype or exaggeration. At the very least, even those authors who employ the terminology of the postmodern seem to feel compelled to condemn its construction as irrecusably opaque.
In what follows, I cannot hope to dissolve this prejudice. Indeed, I rather expect to bear out the darker suspicions of the more linguistically cautious and conceptually conservative. This is so especially where the topical range of this essay moves from malls to museums, city squares, art culture—politically, morally, and most particularly as a business enterprise—late-capitalism, and an extended word on the myth and cost of genius. In all, I seek to indicate the positive value of the postmodern, parodic ironicized role or future of art beyond a recitation of negative valuations of the state of the postmodern world, thus raising the question of the direction of—whither?—art.

**The Architecture of Progress: Modern Efficiency vs. Postmodern Delight**

In architecture, where the term postmodern has its least disputed provenance, the postmodern is negatively identifiable because of its referential component: the much touted parodicality or pastiche of the postmodern draws and plays upon classical as well as modern lines. The style of pastiche is the deliberate mixing of traditional symbols with decorative/functional design. The postmodern programme of pastiche as a style subverts—undermines or decodes—formally utopian and progressive elements. The object referent ordinarily invoked at this point is typically a museum, that is, a museum of the newest, postmodern kind, where the architecture of the museum is as significant an aesthetic object as the artworks housed within. Thus illustrated, postmodern decoding and subversion is a serious, cultural affair. And such serious weight, such cultural value is illuminated by example and analysis, as Charles Jencks has discussed James Stirling's design for the Turner Wing in London's Tate Gallery or Stuttgart's Neue Staatsgallerie. Following and going beyond Jencks, one may also note the social codes of recently constructed (architecturally designed) public "spaces" (or "squares") in Pittsburgh (Venturi) and New Orleans (Moore’s Piazza d'ltalia) and, in France, Ricardo Bofill’s deliberately bastard concept of the Parisian suburb’s Roman/Greek (i.e., generic classical) Amphitheatre/Coliseum/ Temple apartment complex or, finally, and really incidentally, the museum-cum-public-space construction seeking to play upon old design and reflective complement of the “new” in I.M. Pei’s Louvre pyramid.

Although I shall discuss both museums and public spaces in what follows, such references can be no more than marginal in both content and figure. For I contend that the effective functioning of the postmodern as a cultural constellation can best be seen in commercial or—even better—consumer-oriented architecture. By this I refer not merely to the buildings of corporate American power (viz., the AT&T/Philip Johnson “Chippendale” building—an irreverent denomination missing the
intended classical entablature and thus illuminating the postmodern joke) but the everyday achievement that is nearly everywhere to be found, most notably of course in North America, but also abroad.

In all, I refer to shopping malls, to the abundance of new constructions of and reconstruction in—tellingly spoken of as “face-lifts”—suburban/urban shopping malls and department store complexes. These face-lifts are all the easier to accomplish where “up-to-date” construction techniques combine “ready-made” construction with modular veneers; that is, where function is a matter of form and where form is reduced to mere or pure formality. Faced with gleaming marble, brass and chrome—“gold” and “silver” glittering on blood-veined stone—the surfaces of mall architecture reflect the grand-image value scheme of monumental architecture in construction and materials. Below, we shall see that the image-ethos of a carefully nurtured respect for the values of mass culture, be this a kitsch-similar shopping mall plaza in the streamlined late-modern (the image of consumer, “user” efficiency) mode or the postmodern, practical design (commodity “efficient”) of recent shopping malls, facilitating the movements of a mass of people is an illusion. In other words, the apparent affinity for the values of so-called “mass” culture is in the end little more than a promotional schematic for conveying the (temporary) image of an exceptional aura. Like the new techniques for cutting wafer-thin panels of marble, substance is a matter not of structure but of seeming.

Miracle on 32nd Street: The Mall

A few years ago, a new “store” appeared in an obvious postmodern mode, resurrected in New York City’s Herald Square with a certain flattened fanfare for a final hurrah from the ashes of Gimbel’s Department Store. Gimbel’s, New Yorkers of even modest ages will remember, was a competitor of Macy’s, the department store long and still dominating Herald Square. The new A&S Plaza, intercalated with an eminently featureless, mirrored building, borrowing Macy’s nominal connection as Herald Center, is a pastiche of both department store—literal super market of linens and clothing, houseware and cosmetic goods, etc.—and the suburban style shopping mall mosaic of reduplicative individual stores. This new bid for attention in New York’s old garment district—where it is perhaps easier to be ignored than almost anywhere—signals nothing like a triumph of A&S over Macy’s, still touted as “the world’s largest store.” Like Macy’s—or like Bloomingdale’s and almost all New York City department stores—A&S is little more than the outer husk sheltering invisible financial movements so that newspaper reports of “leveraged buyouts” go hand in hand with little signs assuring customers at cash registers that near-bankruptcy (so-called “Chapter 11”) status

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means nothing.

In fact, the new A&S store facing the square where Broadway and Sixth Avenue meet and diverge is not a store in the traditional sense at all. Although labelled as A&S at its entrances and on the building’s edge with huge pastel neon lights—barber shop marquees, phallic top and bottom—it is not A&S, in fact, and it is not a department store. Mirrored in Herald Center’s black-windowed facade, which in its turn reflects Macy’s block-long presence in the same square, is not A&S as such and alone (the plurality of its name seems hardly out of place) but rather a plurality of stores, indeed, and, as of this writing, several unrented, white-soaped windows, that is potentially an even greater plurality, despite the vicissitudes of the renter’s market. These stores include the wildly successful British import, the “high” postmodernism of the Body Shop, featuring green wash cloths in little baskets and devoted to “traditional” shampoos, make-up and so on, manufactured in nature- and animal-friendly fashion, in addition to the redundant abundance of clothing and music media stores that constitute American and European shopping malls as such.

Displaying its non-utopian, image-conscious, casually postmodern ethos, the external walls of the A&S “store” have been replaced with floor-to-ceiling windows, reflected in Herald Center. Repeating the same reference, the black-windowed Herald Center is decorated with a simulacral trinity borrowed from the coding of transparent corporate and hotel architecture in a perpetual, hierarchic ascent of three illuminated “elevator” rectangles. Within A&S, this external coding is repeated and (naturally) self-decoding in this repetition. Four “real” elevators, two on either side, frame the open-mall style court. At either end, ascending and descending escalators are to be found leading to blind walls and window displays. And yet the formal or progressive a-functionality of the design that seems obvious at first viewing is no more than a distraction which is soon revealed as illusory just as the gargantuan veneer of “A&S” mirrors Macy’s monolithic presence.

Thus, to take the example of the escalators to the five/six/seven floors of the mall, the opposition to progress is not merely “read” out of the array with the insouciance of a discipline-violating academic’s trivially critical interpretation of the design of the interior space. In practice, in effect—so to say, when buying socks—the schematic path of escalator-progress disrupts the intentional subject’s bodily navigation of the mall and in the end converts and codifies the consumer’s desire into an occupation. The problem of progress is the issue of the decoding of the outside—the non-progressive ascent of simulacral skeletal elevators—and the inside—the vermiform effect of an escalator to nowhere.

As in the Beaubourg’s intestinal industrial externalized architecture,
an overtly mechanical evisceration of the modern dyad of form and function, exhibited via a roping mass of tubes and cylinders—"people movers"—the formal arrangement of the "outside inside" totalizes the import of the building’s function. Like Longfellow’s American Indian Engineer, Hiawatha—who fashioned found-material, killed-animal mittens of squirrel-fur, and for warmth turned the inside outside, keeping the warmside, outside, inside—the escalators of the Beaubourg, as people movers, force and direct access to controlled and thus limited points of entrance and keep the museum-side, the object of desire, inside—outside—the people-side, the consumer/public side, outside—inside—and so correspondingly and ultimately, funnel them toward several and separate exits.

But where the Centre Pompidou (the Beaubourg so gallically named for its aesthetic appeal) ultimately directs visitors either to its roof-top cafeteria or its exits, the functional architectural design, the architectonic of the mall schematic highlights entrances above all. In the postmodern mall, exits and "food-courts" are side-issues. Once within one is hard put to find one's way about let alone to find the way out—and this is the point. As a postmodern structure, A&S’s shopping mall uses the same post-Fordian industrial technique reflected in the Beaubourg escalators in design and transport to the same end. In this assembly line what is assembled is not the goods to be sold but rather the buyers themselves. In the code of its architectural integration the valences of ascent and descent are reticulated, and either way the visitor traverses broader sections of the gallery of stores than can match any desire for a product save the not incidentally and thereby generated desire to be in the mall for its own sake.

It is because A&S is a shopping mall that the evident anti-functionality (the presumptive architectonic coding) of the escalator design is as illusory as the transparent appearance of the external mock elevators. In a culture of the simulacral and the spectacle, the trek to the next escalator, whether successfully found or not, transforms the "visitor" willy nilly into a "shopper," that is, a committed, attentive tourist of shopping options. The mall shopper is a high-tech "flaneur"—by default. The escalators could hardly be more functional. Where the elevators have been opened by the transparency of their walls to permit the shopper a vision of the possibilities at his disposal, the escalator in turn permits the shopper to "directly" experience these actual possibilities—the commodities, the "things" themselves—on the way to (in the way of!) her destination. In this same effective vision, the escalators in the A&S store itself convey an imaginary constitution of the shopper: as one ascends one passes oneself on the mirrored wall along the descending side of the adjacent escalator. This imaginary reflection, common to most department stores

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and malls, mirrors not only the shopper himself/herself, but amidst and in
train with other shoppers intent on a common quest, the reflection
projects the fantasy of capitalist culture, the holy grail, the challenging
object that matches and fulfills perfect desire. Because these escalators
too are blind, literal diverticula, alternating only by way of the reverse
second double bank of escalators, any "efficient" progress through the
tiers of the store is frustrated. Challenged to advance, the consumer—and
thus one becomes a consumer—must circle to the rear of the escalator
bank to continue to the next floor and so on. The procedure does not yield
any straightforward compensation. Rather, to transform and conflate
Benjamin's image, the shoppers are remade as flaneurs in the "age of
mechanical transportation" by dint of the encounter with an array of
commodities more bewildering by abundance than by the scintillation of
appearance much less any shock of novelty.

It is significant to note the very postmodern advantage of this impedi-
ment to free passage—not of course as a benefit to the time-pressured and
harried consumer but rather for the corporate interests yielding the design
of this "public" space. To see the contrast between postmodern and
modern corporate ideals as the difference between the postmodern
imaginary of marble veneer, dazzling mirrors of glass and chrome, and
the modern image of effective progress, I shall offer a brief contemporary
example to illustrate the articulation of public and commercial space.
Returning to an even more cursory consideration of Macy's significance
as gargantua, i.e., as the "world's largest store," I will question the
postmodern representation of the future of art and the romantic image of
art and genius for art's sake.

The architectonic of the mall, the hotel, the shopping plaza, is not
only literally but figuratively reflected in Boston's Copley Place—in the
adjacent mirror wall of the Hancock Tower (Henry Cobb, I.M. Pei)—as
well as in the transformation of the function of the decorative city-square
as market-place. The newly reworked Copley Square is nothing like a
new-fitted agora. What was once a rather unpretentious and at the very
least architecturally harmonious square in front of the Richardson-
Romanesque Trinity Church has thus recently been re-configured to
permit, among other "functions," an old-fashioned, more central farmer's
market. That Boston already sported such a market, indeed a traditional
market which still operates under highway overpasses, amidst girders and
such, at the thus traditionally named Haymarket, suggests that the
impulse for the (seasonal) installation of such a market across from the
classical amphitheatre-style stepped construction facing the Copley Plaza
Hotel, the Mirror Side of the Hancock Tower, reflecting Trinity Church in
its turn and the levelled square itself, all under the gaze of the
Monumental American Classicism of the Boston Public Library, has to do

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with the cultivation of the so-called but not so placed Copley Place, which is of course, not a place, plaza, or square but a mall. Beyond stylistic pomo invective or invocation, it should be noted that the city square, re-designed and capitalized in accord with the latest marketing theory or trend, represents not the differences so important to valorize for postmodern sensitivities but only the image or appearance of difference. Little vendor pushcarts on the square are replicas of the pushcarts in Faneuil Hall and in the mall itself. The new “square” is little more than a counterpiece, an echo or repetition in the age of mass/mechanical reproduction—not an ironic quotation of shopping possibilities/prospects offered either in the mall itself or else to be found on the ever imaginary Newberry Street. The result is that one barely eats lunch in the square. Instead one passes through, one recuperates, one exposes oneself (in season) to the vendors.

As agora, the market has always been the natural gathering place. The trick is to conduct political life in the public space that is the space of desire, the life of the marketplace. The history of the modern era suggests that this has never been easy. Nor is this achieved in Boston, as it is not in Pittsburgh or New Orleans. It is not that the spaces here are empty, rather that the kind of use, the limits of use are at issue and conspicuously so. Like the public atriums large corporations declare “open to the public,” or like the garden housing projects built in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere several decades ago, the (justifying) conception fails to match use in practice—in real life. Shoppers or passersby gather in the new city square much as they would in a shopping mall gallery. But like the mall gallery, or the New York corporate atrium defined by city law to be made accessible to the public, the users of the new city square know themselves to be users, that is assigned access to the space on the terms of the provider. The new city square does not duplicate the function of an old market square, despite the proximity of the “market,” just because it is not a shared space or a commons. It is thus noteworthy that Boston actually features a “Commons” so named and a “working” locale reflecting the special spirit, the “genius loci,” to speak with Norberg-Schulz, of Boston as such. It is not irrelevant that on the Commons itself, this last genial value is there in spades, where the same local spirit is so elusive and (otherwise) so desired by designers that they even speak of designing not squares but “spaces” and “locales.” This is not to say that they fail, for where the old gods flee, some new simulacral god can come to stand. Thus the square of postmodern public life is absorbed in the simulacra of life that is the commodity and its desire, the functional life of the market place. If we fail to “hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn,” or miss the “sight of Proteus rising from the sea,” we have a completely fluid world of trademarks and decorations: we are pagan enough—but without antique

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convention, history, or "depth." Hence in the postmodern mall, hotel, or office building we have temple entablatures without temples, generic columns supporting nothing, generic gods no one can name, sacrificial decorations without a sacrifice.  

In the specific world of commerce, the question is whether Macy's can be said to represent the doomed competition of the classic art-deco modern ideal or whether it too is to be taken in the image of the (here) retrofitted and thus ever more secure ascendance of the postmodern? This issue is open to debate and Macy's is caught in the same economic maelstrom that may be said to have engendered—to combine Jameson's terminology with Baudrillard's image and description—the *late-capitalist* space of desire and fulfillment. Macy's re-designs its own floorplan seasonally. Yet in the archaeological remainders of its design, in its base structure, still discernable at the edges of the retro-fitted post-modern, Macy's remains a paragon of futuristic modern (that is: consumer-, here *customer*-oriented) efficiency. In the service of this efficient ideal, banks of elevators, batteries emblematic of an "old-fashioned" modernity, provide local as well as express service to the highest floors. Even more archaically service-oriented in this context, escalators permit direct ascent not only to the floor but even the locale of choice in a reticulated array. Such facilitation of desire is an old ideal: the new postmodern merely invites or simulates the image of desire and the ultimate end is the array of the sale, the commodity display? The "efficiency" in this latter context is the permanent, unremitting sell.

What, if anything, has the image of the futuristic modern and the postmodern future, illustrated by the contrast between two New York City icons of consumption and the contrast between consumer/customer and market/commodity efficiency, to do with art? What has Boston's Copley Place to do with the future of art, the question *whither art*?

In the wake of an extended metaphor or introductory parable, any thematic question tends to lose its spring—its legs have, as it were, gone to sleep in the meantime. To nudge this question to life once again, let me suggest that the point of comparison turns on the issue of the *future*, the fore-structure, the avant-garde in art. Thus we may note that just as the store of the future represents an outmoded modern ideal, the vision of the future of art in the art world, as the art of the future, is similarly dated. The old-fashioned modernism of the terms *futurism* and the *avant-garde*, even in the now almost patently quaint idea of Dadaism, work as descriptive terms providing an ethos of invention and a justification for innovation. This ethos was at once easily appropriated not only by the artists themselves but by generations of promoters and purveyors of art and by the consultants/investment advisers, curators, dealers, philosopher-aestheticians (as distinguished from those "aestheticians" who work in

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hair salons), and above all critics, historians, and so on. The art work itself, so categorized, is readily recognizable and (especially in the case of the avant-garde) the cultural ethos implied by both the critical terminology and the identified/identifiable artists could win advocates among the potentially, ideationally ever-open ideal of the “modern public” of non-artists and non-critics. This last public or mass connection—that of consumer-relations—is especially important for the projects of museum and documentary film and literary, artbook, or cocktail culture.

Futurism and Postmodern Art Futures

It is symptomatic of a postmodern sensibility that the vision of futurism, for example, is now regarded as “naive,” and quaintly so, rather than falsely so. Thus conceived, the future itself is passé, a dated phenomenon. Having reached its nadir in commercial influences as these survive (notably—instructively—largely) in print advertisements of the streamlined twenties and thirties and in the abbreviated flair of the forties and in the television commercials of the fifties and sixties, \(^{10}\) “futurism” has been eclipsed or modified as a testimony to the factically postmodern condition of today’s “modern times.” The future, the real future opposing the future anterior of nostalgic return, is no longer presented as a streamlined, or stainless steel flared-fantasy or iconized in solid-state transistors, the latest intel chips, or reflected in the surfaces of brushed steel and metallic black, red, and transparent casings, nor is it to be found in any kind of control panel utopia. More and more, one encounters literary and cinematic representations of what one critic dubs the “new ‘bad future,’” \(^{11}\) that is, the new, the inescapable “bad” future, the future of the Terminator, of RoboCop, of low-brow revisions of Bladerunner, movie or video images of mediatized danger. Yet this “bad” future trend is less dominant—and this is the crux of what it is to be postmodern after all and all along—than the sophisticatedly blasé, casual representations of anticipated “progressive” modes or fashions, proffered under the sign of imminent eclipse: apocalypse mode, that is, an eschatology of apocalypse without angst.

In this context, any new avatar of futurism resembles an inverted postmodernism. Technology continues its headlong expansion in its “new” projection, but without the utopian conviction, without the excelsior urgency of the modern vision. The advances of technology thus may seem without exception to yield environmental disasters but the anticipation of any technological cure-all is about as secure in the public mind as McDonald’s advertised claim for the biodegradability of their styrofoam hamburger coffins. In this new “bad” or decadent profile, the “future” fits a casually apocalyptic contour, the advances of technology keep pace with a proliferation of side-effects, trade-offs, and the balancing of catastrophic costs with the meager benefits of variations.
upon the latest automotive and kitchen gadgetry, *eternally* offering, despite new lineaments and variations, ever recognizably the same. The point here, the postmodern condition again, is that we are past minding.

Of course, if the appeal of futurism as a style in art depends on the appeal of the (imaginable) future, this constraint hardly holds for the avant-garde. The avant-garde is always possible. And hence if not the “reality” or practice at least the spirit of the radical avant-garde in art and literature continues to draw thinkers on the left. Perhaps this remains so because the avant-gardist style was chameleon enough to be counted as futurist when the futurist movement had viability, while yet being flexible enough to be lodged as dadaist, then modernist, abstractionist, absolutist, etc., so too as pop-art counter-expression, in the sixties and seventies, and hence to find itself in the eighties and on the edge of the nineties still preserved as a type of postmodern *sans* blasé denigration as the critical invocation of pastiche—that is, the postmodern conceived as still parodic, still reactionary.¹²

The difference between the postmodern, and the avant-garde (as indeed the futurist movement understood both as the ideological political/economic planning progress of futurologists as well as the Russian and Italian practitioners of style) is to be found in the radical anti- or non-elitism of the postmodern perspective. The pastiche-parodicality of the postmodern, its double-coding, is deliberate and casual, disdaining high culture even as it offers these very icons for the consumption of mass reception or culture; conversely, the code offered to the critic is the code of this double-vantage. This anti-elitist spirit imbues even the philosophically sophisticated notion of a double coding¹³ with a conspicuously, deliberately vulgarized ethos.¹⁴

But if (postmodern, new avant-gardist, neo-political, that is pluralist) art thus eschews any elite assignment—and with this disavowal we return to the matter at hand in the present essay—what is the future of art? Here, the ordinary query posed in the voice of the ordinary man, the so-called average consumer, asks what then is to remain special about it? In blunt consumerist terms, if art is nothing but a commodity like any other, what’s its particular worth? and where is a reliable guide to its value to be found? This question may be posed with a political edge in the (now almost buried!) wake of the Mapplethorpe-vs-Helms controversy, i.e., a recent contribution to the old pornography vs. art debate.

In the US, the controversy of funding the (potentially publically offensive) arts is not only a constitutional issue. The question of censorship here is also very much a question of financial support—indeed this is precisely what is at issue. For it is not enough that the artworks be offered for sale. The issue of freedom here—and the stuff not of erotica, which probably does not exist as such, but of pornography, which does
exist as such, has always been a hallmark issue for the freedom of speech in the US—is not a matter of unhampered productivity, as formerly counter-political, reactionary artists and authors in Eastern European countries have recently discovered to their (somewhat touching) surprise. What is at stake is marketability and, because this is equally important in any late-capitalist market, subvention.

The art and intellectual community of commodification requires an imprimatur: the endowment support of an artist not only certifies his or her market quality—thus the academic pretensions of modernity—but it also coordinates his or her marketability, while it also enables the artist like the farmer to survive (to ignore) the pressures of the same market. Despite the plethora of market-defined distinctions, the romantic, even avant-gardiste image of the artist apart from the market and market pressures (impurity) continues as the dominant definition of art as such. Even Warhol’s deliberate mockery of the market and appeal or playing to the same was and continues to be interpreted as I have described it: that is, it is taken to be a deliberate mockery. Which is of course to say, Warhol’s mockery of (appeal to) the market is regarded as separated from and opposed to and thus independent of market influence. This convicted innocence, the portrait of the artist as starving, tortured, but always pure, always ravaged by desires and visions beyond the market is the problem here. For by mutual and simultaneous definition marketable art, like the interest-free sanction required for the free approval of purely aesthetic delight, must not display its genesis or calculation in terms of the market.

Now national endowment and foundational support in the arts as in the humanities as, indeed, in the sciences themselves, is not and has never been “pure.” In a circle that any grant-seeker knows well, only those artists, scholars, and scientists already recognized as successful by institutionalized professional standards, that is according to the review of established “peers,” are worthy of support. In the case of the National Endowment for the Arts (hereafter: NEA) controversy no “new” (taken in the strict sense as unknown or in the proverbial or even the literal sense as “starving”) artists as such were involved. Hence, and most notably, Joseph Papp (Mr. Shakespeare Marathon) could make a most public display of his post-Mapplethorpe refusal of his own NEA award and thus show his solidarity with the ideal of art, that is, that supported by the public and granted, administrated via pure, that is peer, sanctions.

The image cultivated by the ideal of public support for the arts, suggests support for artistic endeavors apart from (values of) the marketplace. But in fact nearly all of the artists involved in the NEA debate were and are already established, meaning commercially, financially successful, recognized artists. In this sense, the artists/projects themselves had already passed muster as saleable (the criterion of

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progress, as modern as it is postmodern) by the standards of NEA committee evaluation. What is to be emphasized here is the ordinary corollary of critical success, namely the criterion for failure. The new, the all-too-new, the unrecognizably oblique, or the simply non-standard or non-mainline, non-coopted theme or methodology, that is, anything regarded as not (yet or no-longer) art—the non-marketable in sum—is and has always been rejected according to the standards of such agencies of peers and peer judges—that is of course inevitably a collective of anticipatory ressentiment and recollective, retroactive collusion—as unsupportable. What the NEA supports is “Art.” That’s what a successful grant application means to an artist, and what it means to the purveyors, and hence to the consultant, to the investor, etc.; such a canonization, such recognition as attaining to the status of “Art” is the imprimatur conferred. Conversely, what the NEA rejects is, by definition once again, not-art.

This endowment canon reflects of course nothing less than the ethos of endowment support, i.e., value judgments or, in still other words, the NEA’s own moral standards. The “moral” outrage of the conservatives spearheaded by the all-too typically Southern stateman, Jesse Helms’ good (old boy) confusion is the “morality” of the (so-called) voiceless public. The “moral” standards of the art-world are different, but no less moral, hardly less sanctimonious. Corroborating this parallel with Helms’ proposed amendment, in the art world the result is the same and to the same effect: only that which is sanctioned sells. What is more, providing an indirect proof of the original market association between public endowment support and quality confirmation, the controversy itself has been an economic windfall for the purveyors of Mapplethorpe prints, as for the sale of other associated works and corporate sponsoring of performance artists. Here it should suffice to recollect that in this first case there has been no run on explicitly homoerotic or high contrast botanical black and white photographs as such: only Robert Mapplethorpe’s work—and thus his estate—has enjoyed the economic benefits of Warhol’s famously approximate fifteen minutes of public attention. Yet beyond the burst of a popular market success, the issue can and should be seen to be one of moral distinction. Not only does the NEA—and we may think of other endowment committees, including museum boards and academic and other institutions—operate by its own inquisitorial, even draconian standards but in the current political climate the challenge from Helms and the non-productive but consuming public in effect works as an indirect coefficient of those very same opposed standards. 15 Art for art’s sake.

Perhaps in the same way, the consequence of the decoding, massification of art suggests that art is a matter of promotion, of hype, and like the word postmodern, more than just a little exaggeration. Thus
critics and investors alike can occasionally speak on behalf of the “consuming” public to ask why art should be featured as the cultural treasure of museum exhibitions and study institutes? This is a structural, material question. Such museums and study institutes, indeed, even the departments of art history, art criticism and studio art at the university level, may not be separated from the world of commercial enterprise. Is the museum—and more indirectly but still coordinately culpable, the university study-institute—anything but the hawk of a certain vision of culture to structure and inform the possibilities of public consumption in a supplier’s hierarchic panoply of original investment and the valuation of canonical reproduction? The cultural exposition that is the business of museum work requires fund-raising and grantsmanship, but the museum is less and less any kind of public work. Indeed, like civic parks or monuments, like city squares, or country markets, one may ask whether public works exist at all.

In New York City, public admission charges to museums fairly match the price of admission to first-run movie theaters. Thus public—“mass”—support is offered from all sides, via civic and commercial endowment support and once again then at the door, and yet again in the profits won from the ubiquitous museum shops and mail-order catalogs. In addition, the circulation of curators from museums to commercial galleries means that charges of collusion between museum boards and these latter vending machines are no longer surprising—if, apart from the Romantic ethos of artistic purity, such charges ever were surprising, one thinks of Berenson, one thinks of Winckelmann. More recently, of course, Hans Haacke, has made an artistic career of what could be called monumental and exhibitional ressentiment. Given both his talent and his success, this designation should not be heard as a subjective psychology of his work, or as any kind of denigration, but rather as a simple description of the content of its presentation. Haacke’s work is important and its message needs to be heard—and this point must be made after the preceding discussion of art and markets—but its efficacy is questionable given the reflective critical deflation of sanctioned critique. The striking impotence of Jenny Holzer’s deliberately derivative constructions (truisms carved in polished granite and white marble, or flashed in neon lights in Times Square, or balancing the cost of success for a woman-artist and the obscene expense of an installation in the Venice Biennial) bears out this very point. If as Marcuse pointed out, the modern era is the era of one-dimensionality, the postmodern mirror schema flattens even the one-dimensional, subverting the critical effort of parody in the categorical impotence of pastiche. As Nietzsche taught in a different voice, echoed by no less a critic of the left than Adorno himself, the absorption of critique is the highest—the most dangerous because most insidious—will to power.
And yet if art is ineluctably commercial, perhaps this is only to say that it has returned to its pristine origin as an organ of civic and religious culture, for that is embodied by the commercial today—but that that return is one effected in a post-modern era. This era is beyond art, a culture of civic value after the death of the political (or its collapse into economic and ethnic competition as the current changes—now political, now violent machinations and leading more often than not to third-world style indigence/impotence—in East Europe and the Middle East suggest) and the death of the religious (or its cooption in the ethos of a technico-scientific life-aesthetic). Art has always been for sale.

What does this mean? Whither art? What is its future? Is it only an element in the commodity schemas of a post-industrial economy, an economy which has absorbed culture? Is it consignment to the design of MTV backdrops and choreography? We have discussed museums and public squares, supermarkets and museums. Is art expressed in the architecture of urban/suburban shopping “spaces,” or the external “image” of massive importance or sleek technopower of a corporate city center, or by way of a selective array of investment options—“art”—for the interior decoration of banks, executive headquarters, and other office buildings? And beyond MTV’s video backdrops and technical proficiency, beyond the dancer’s choreography, what of the music? Is music no more than what is experienced day to day, in restaurants and supermarkets, as a background, head-flattening, heart-deafening experience? Beyond public music, there is private music, carried in one’s pocket or strapped to one’s waist, so that one’s body in the open world is, as it were, “wired” for sound? Is music, as art reducible to a signifier of one’s social class, as a taste, dominating one’s living room, as a sign of material success, a static techno-array of stereo equipment, massive speakers, and rows of gleaming CDs? Apart from the investment value of art, the social significance of style, where is art to be found? I have suggested that an answer to this question must address both the manifold pervasiveness as well as the multifarious poverty of art in late-modern, high-, and perpetually capitalist culture. If even art for art’s sake never worked for art’s sake alone, then the loss of innocence Umberto Eco characterizes as late-modern/postmodern is not only the death of illusion but the possibility of awaking to the truth of, the shock of tradition. In this death, asking the question of the future of art, we need to be open to the possibility of being true to the past, a truth which brings the future.

This possibility is consonant with the still unthought but already celebrated value of pluralism. We do live in an age of hyper-individualism, with the very exaggerated sense of self Donald Kuspit has ironically underlined as the paradox heralding the death of the subject. And it is to this that the myth of the artist corresponds in a democratic
massified ideal. The elite, esoteric few in our day includes everyone, whether by moral command (the imperative of political correctness) or capitalist convention. It is not that the idea of pluralism is to be unmasked as a fraud or revealed as impossible or as the enemy of the modern ideal of the individual, of authenticity, of the proper, but that to think genuine pluralism invites the same silence as thinking the individual qua individual. What is needed to prepare the possibility of a pluralistic future for art, not merely as the art of hyperindividualism with respect to (for) the other, calls for genuine solicitude: for the attention to the difficulty of the question for understanding and for action I name reticence. To be the consecrators of being and the now, the golden present, the moment, not just for ourselves but for others, demands that we take care to note the difficulty of pluralism beyond the value of the word and the extraordinary elusiveness of true solicitousness in the reticent respect that regards the other as other and lets what is be in being, neither for us nor unrelated to us but as it is. Such solicitude is other than the diffident distance that covers disinterest and it is not sycophancy sprung from fear or guilt, for it only works when those in power are charged to give themselves over to such reticence.

A full discussion of this moral-aesthetic imperative must be left for another day, but it is necessary to note in indicating this possible direction for the future of art that in speaking of reticence I am not advocating a politics of resentment or championing the masochistic cult of the victim. In raising the question of art and culture, of the relation between self and other, I have suggested that as a slogan, the idea of pluralism offers no ready answer to the question. This is not least because like the eclecticism so often identified with post-modernism, pluralism still needs to be thought. To advocate openness, to take the part of the other is harder than one thinks. It has yet to be done where the very conception of otherness remains a unilateral proclamation uttered from within the discourse of reason.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 A few authors, notably including Habermas, feel that the postmodern is the pre-modern. And Charles Jencks has recently argued that this is effectively Lyotard’s conclusion as well. Some would maintain that what is called postmodern is little more than modernity—again. Jencks has sought to preserve a distinct sense of the postmodern by clarifying or better: defining the term as involving an essential irony, asserting with Margaret Rose and Linda Hutcheon that double-coding is the key which distinguishes the postmodern from late-modernity. Although it is not the aim of this paper to argue, it is worth noting that the critical advantage of the “postmodern” derives from this seemingly
inexhaustible resistance.


5 Note that Jencks takes special pains to explain that Piano and Roger’s Pompidou Center is not postmodern but “high tech.” I am not classifying the building here but suggesting the difference the “high tech” or late modern makes compared with the ideals (not necessarily the much criticized lived achievements of certain exemplars of) of modern architecture. See the text of his footnote number 10, in “Postmodern v. Late-Modern,” 21.

6 These are old issues, and, with specific reference to Boston, a theme addressed in some now dated detail by Jane Jacobs and, somewhat more recently by Christian Norberg-Schulz. Additional discussions are offered on this rather reluctantly postmodern of modern themes in the writings of Hal Foster and Marshall Berman, among many others.

7 Jencks, p. 9, regards this diffidence as a defining feature, and indeed, virtue of the postmodern: “Whereas a mythology was given to the artist in the past by tradition and by patron, in the postmodern world it is chosen and invented.”


9 Macy’s escalators on the higher floors feature the old wooden treads which date the character of the design, and presage the character of modern demolition with a quaint endurance, which thus represents the luxury or patina of “an antique.”


11 Fred Glass in Science in Context.


13 In this context see again Glass’s description of Robocop and Kaplan’s description of Bladerunner in Science in Context.


15 Thus the performance artist Karen Finley—renowned as she is for performances smeared with chocolate-goo and cherry red jello, standing in for latterly and obviously blood and formerly feces/dirt—has happened into what is critically and negatively thought to be a coat-tail ride, a contaminative effect or “wind-fall” for her. Such a negative assessment criticizes the derivative provenance of Finley’s recent Joseph Beuys-like success. But to this writer’s knowledge, this sort of critical objection is rarely applied to estimate the “value” of Beuys’ own plastic and so temporarily static art— viscously present, evanescent on the side of slow decay. Apparently the artist as static
performer is easier to take than the living, directly, dramatically mimetic art, in the lived-contemporary and so face-to-face gesture of performance. It catches in the critic’s throat, who murmurs that this is, after all, not art but only a side-effect of politicized attention. In place of the applause and serious attention paid to Beuys, Finley’s critics moralistically speculate about the distraction of an *illicit* attention.


17 Kuspit, p. 64, expresses this hyper- or “exaggerated individuality” towards a “collective nonconformity” as “institutionalized non-conformity,” as “narcissistic nonconformity,” which he explains as “narcissism with a difference, the neonarcissism prevalent in our world of exaggerated individuality.”