

*If you're  
Not  
Engaged in  
History,  
you're  
Not  
Engaged*

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My career began in 1977 when John Gibson, then famous for his commissioning of large artists' projects, told patron Maya Hoffmann and artist Dennis Oppenheim that he would not work on getting an assemblage of large outdoor works built on her vast holdings in the Camargue marsh of southern France. He said giant projects are too much work, and that the patron and artist should settle for having clay models put on display at the Basel Kunstmuseum, just in time that year for the Art Fair.

I decided to do what Gibson would not do.

I took literally the stated ambitions of Walter De Maria to have a construction company to build large outdoor projects, instead of just an art foundation building one-of-a-kinds.

I took literally what De Maria told me about wanting to build many Lightning Fields, thinking that they might have both an ecological and artistic value.

I took literally the voicings by Oppenheim and Acconci to make architecture – spaces in which the body is participant – not just art.

I took literally the ambitions of Beuys and Smithson to operate in the real world, to make ideas from art manifest in daily life.

Recalling the Futurists and Constructivists, and knowing from Gordon Matta-Clark what he was intending to start with his follow-through on Leonidov's *Sky Hook*, only halted by death, I focused on directing ideas from art to mass media, the media which people commonly believe, and to large-scale construction and industry. This had occurred in many times past, like the Renaissance. Why not now?

I discovered a few obstacles:

1. The existing power structure does not want an immanent change in the means of production, in the industrial and hence social fabric, of new art. David Rockefeller explained to Les Levine that dole-granting institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts were created to isolate artists from each other, to confine their attention to polite tasks, and to prevent them from combining and gaining the sort of power over material culture and the built reality as it is enjoyed by, for example, the big oil firms. Art is left in a condition of requiring 'support'.

2. The secret police regard art as essentially dangerous, being heretical, and they seek consistently to slow it down, de-fang it, distort its market and incentives, render it nearly harmless. I can cite from experience the authorities in Germany, the US, France, the UK, even Holland. A game goes on. It is little different from what has been going on in allegedly totalitarian states like the Soviet Union, where secret police efforts to control art were well known.

3. After observing the Iran-Contra scandal (at the UN, in respected newspapers, in Pakistan, in Germany), and after observing efforts by German secret agents to doctor satellite photographs, plant false news stories and create fake scenarios of alleged assassination attempts to accelerate unification, I conclude that there are two professional avenues for people with artistic imaginations: the art world, including museums, galleries and critics; and the secret police. One is proclamatory and public, but with little power; the other operates quietly, behind the scenes, but usually – except in the case of political breakdown – has dominant power over public opinion and business policy. One professes to try making people more intelligent. The other has the task, in addition of conserving 'intelligence' for itself, of keeping people stupid.

4. The art world is penetrated by the secret police. The secret police are not penetrated by the art world – but they can be outflanked. Artists can spread their ideas and work to many countries, many cultures, many different social strata and cultural markets. Generally, the more respectable and well-funded an art institution or gallery, the greater the likelihood a penetration or compromise. The more likely there are national government efforts to decide what is part of a national cultural voice. The artist can outflank by going pan-national.

5. The art critic, though necessary to the representation of new ideas, can also be an obstacle. Usually, given their role of survey and selection, and their career need to not make mistakes, they tend to manage portfolios of artists and ideas much as stockbrokers manage portfolios of companies to trade. They prefer to rest secure with whatever paradigms of selection they have developed. To command proper respect, one must outflank them.

In 1989, for example, a show of mine, when reviewed by a leading critic, earned doubt, incomprehension, a complaint that the ideas may be good and may be well-

intentioned but are not clear. At the same time, the producer of a popular US TV show, reaching a daily audience of 10-20 million, saw the show, promptly understood and liked the ideas, and arranged for a 45-minute broadcast. The audience is chiefly working class. The host, a national figure, is famous for making fun of his guests. But in this broadcast, the host and his studio audience liked what the guest was saying, understood what he was saying and showing, and endorsed it all heartily. The people understood; the art critic did not: who's more intelligent? The same happens with other professions: architects get it, scientists get it, TV journalists get it, politicians from aggrieved countries get it, but – even though all the ideas can be traced directly to art – most critics do not. An artist who attempts to be understood by critics but who fails to attend to a diversified public is bound for oblivion.

6. In the world of art, unlike virtually all other fields of inquiry and action – with the exception, possibly, of dentistry – it is both possible and even encouraged to know virtually nothing outside of what is known in the world of art. The knowledge that educated people at cocktail parties are supposed to have of world affairs, of economics, of science and engineering – or even architecture – is neither expected or desired among those who call themselves artists or who make a profession of selecting, writing about or being curators for artists. As one who has moved in many circles, I conclude that there are two kinds of parties: one, for people who generally know what's going on, but tend to know little about art; the other, for people in the art world, who tend to know nothing about what's going on. This makes art cut off from the rest of the world. Even though it may be important, it has no interface. What it knows cannot be integrated with what other people know. In 1978, when I was explaining to a major curator how scientists were advocating the controlled harvesting of wild animal species as more efficient than animal or even most plant domestication, and how artists like Joseph Beuys – calling himself *Chief of the Hunters* – were meeting what the scientists said was a major requirement, a change in cultural attitudes, the curator dismissed the scientific views as absurd. Within a month a front-page story of a major news magazine featured the scientists' views. The curator refused to entertain new ideas from outside her immediate profession. More, she refused to entertain ideas which in the normal world would be cover-story news. I met this curator, now more powerful, at a party recently in Paris: she is very busy buying and selling the names of individual star artists. It would have been futile to raise the issue of overall change in the material culture. Why did Beuys do *Coyote*? The question is better discussed outside the art world.

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I do not speak alone. A bid for genuine power and a genuine hearing expands. Artists increasingly seek ways out of the art world. Jeff Koons, Jenny Holzer, Rebecca Horn, Richard Prince – all seek a wider audience.

What can the museum, the institutional structure specified for art, do about that?

First, as I know from experience, the museum – like the church of centuries before – provides sanctuary. What you cannot do in the real world, or what causes interference or blockage from the secret police, can – at least on a simulative level – be conducted with safety within the museum or curatorial context. If I propose a Black Sea consolidation in public in Germany or Austria, I risk criminalization, but if I propose it through a museum or culture-fest context, I can. Then, as one curator emphasized, *it's only art*. By rendering ideas in a context of art, hence harmless and unreal, the museum allows ideas at least to survive.

Next, how might we allow the ideas to expand? How might we allow ideas to take root and spread? Why else have an idea if it cannot become manifest in the world?

Richard Serra has spent decades executing the same ideas about great weights positioned in space: where is the architecture that can ensue?

Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Walter De Maria, Bruce Nauman and others produced giant earthworks, starting almost 30 years ago. Their ideas have had no

succession. Instead, their contemporaries in the Soviet Union, if working as military engineers, as we noticed with satellite imagery of the Iran-Iraq war zone, have more chance of building what the Western artists once tried out. But what the Soviets built has been largely destroyed by Western military action, covert in Iran in 1987, overt in Kuwait in 1991. Nothing yet stands, achieved, from the art initiated over a generation ago. Instead we live with a sterile imitator (it looks like the earth art of the 60s and 70s, but it does not act like it, nor has any intellectual continuation of it) named Turrell.

X [ So, art is without consequence. It remains furtive, occasional, confined to efforts by individualists now and then, no efforts taking hold to become standard in mass media or architecture. No artist today has anything near to the power of contract construction of, say, Michelangelo, and none has close to the seminal role in engineering and science, in the invention of machines, cameras and weapons, of Leonardo da Vinci and his (many) competitors.

This is less the fault of artists, who cannot help what they do or think, than of the art world. This is the fault of curators, collectors, critics, and the fault ultimately of the institution to which they are all beholden: the museum.

If someone tells me to accommodate someone so that I could (maybe) have a museum show, and if accommodation means being 'Peter Fend' an 'artist' or 'Peter Fend' the 'art star', then I avoid the arrangement. No contemporary art star with museum exhibitions can get anything truly achieved with his or her ideas. The individuation of the artist, and the isolation of intellectual exchange into one person, renders the art sterile, unfulfilled.

By now, the discourse started by Serra, Matta-Clark and Highstein should have yielded buildings as epic as the Pantheon.

By now, the structures first tested by Heizer and Smithson should have yielded a radical transformation in land use throughout Africa, the Americas and Asia.

By now, the rapid-sequence work of Sharits, Paik and Snow should have led to forms of commercial information display mimicking the eye-brain system, as a rapid change-detector, for use by people who make decisions.

By now, questions of whether to do high-definition television, or do real-time image processing, or do parallel screen display of analogic color fields, should have been solved – given the trillions of guilders at stake.

[ What people know of the world, and how they arrange their material affairs in this world, will be critical to their evolution as a species. Art, as a probe into the future modalities of knowing and display, and into future possible arranging of space for living, and into future standards of wealth and value, therefore of investment and accumulation, is critical to evolution. It must be followed up with new techniques of construction, of information display, of information diffusion, of materials extraction and recycling. It must be followed up with a more efficient industrial system. Otherwise it is just a bauble for the idle, a toy for those who seek status, a nothing distracting those who think from what must be done.

α The art world is the last bastion of royalism. It has many people who would pretend to be king, or queen, or – as Steve Pollack said – dictator. It has an elaborate ritual for consuming time and money, called the one-person show, the international – properly selected – museum show, and the vagabondage among art-market capitals worldwide, such that wherever you are you're in the same place, with some selection of the same people, all proving that laughing and smiling can be done anywhere, as money is not a problem and work is, well, done by someone else. Nothing big needs to get built. No world problems, no architectural needs, no state disinformation, need to be met. And once an idea gets as far as being a model for presentation on the lawn of the Basel Kunstmuseum, or some such place for drinks and talk, then there is nothing more necessary to do about it. If the idea should die or be forgotten, well, there's still the piece. And it looks good. So let's party. And let them, the public, those not with

us, eat some phrases like *Stupid people shouldn't breed.*

A few months ago I was asked to propose a software program for Sony for its new High-Definition TV. I was asked to do so as an artist. That is, I was asked to do so as someone with ideas who can be rewarded enough with a name in an advertisement ('star artist'), but without any notable rights of follow-through or business control in case the ideas should work. This is a sure way to be 'appropriated'.

Considering this difficulty, I discussed with a colleague how to develop the software program on our own, in our home country. It turns out that virtually any funding for a program would come either directly or indirectly from the US Department of Defense. Another sure way to be appropriated.

What others take from inventive minds is far more than what inventive minds, the so-called artists, can appropriate from others.

Where is it safe to develop a new idea for visual culture? I propose, for discussion in Europe and The Netherlands (leave aside the rest of the art world, for now), the museum.

I do not mean the present-day museum. I do not mean the institution which, anxious for prestige, seeks to confer prestige and honour on safely-established artists as soon as their work has become well-known – to the art world – and already become boring – to the art world. Most of the real world does not care, anyway. If there would be a visit to a museum to see the work of an established artist, it would be conducted as a matter of Culture and Prestige, as a way of becoming more correct, not especially in order to get any ideas that can be put to use. I had the honor once of travelling with about 30 art world insiders by TGV to the Center for Communication and Culture in St. Etienne to attend the opening of a show about public issues and communication within St. Etienne. Not one person from St. Etienne, or from outside the immediate travelling entourage, with the exception of two or three museum employees, attended the opening. And probably very, very few from St. Etienne ever saw the show. The entire episode was a waste of government money – probably to the pleasure of the secret police, who would like art to have no consequence.

And now, in Berlin, the Nationalgalerie presented to the international art world, plus a few public visitors who would like to be intimidated by Art, a one-man exhibition of someone everyone already knows, Anselm Kiefer. The museum has done its job of making what is past and done Official. This is too small. It must stop.

There should be two types of museums.

① One, in line with recent custom, that conserves and archives the art of the past. I do not mean 'recent past', such that artists and curators alike spend their lives trying to be involved in commemorative shows while an artist is still alive, conferring on each other a joint prestige. I mean the Closed Past. The artists involved are dead. The issues they raise are no longer current. There is nothing contemporary or modern about the work.

② The other, completely different, not trying to dignify or memorialize or elevate to long-term memory the work of anything contemporary, not trying to archive or conserve or make Official what happened in recent years, is an institution involved directly, hands on, in the production of art today. One might speak less of a museum than of a sanctuary, a protected place in which new ideas and invention flourish, without having to be appropriated by Sony or converted by the Pentagon. The museum becomes a copyright-sharing workshop, <sup>for</sup> a place in which artists can collect energy and generate co-reflective work. A prime example, I believe, was the *News Room* at Museum Fodor in 1989. Another example: the performances and in-situ actions of conceptual artists during the 1970s. The competition is not for an authoritative exhibition of already past art by an already too-well-known personality. The competition is for the hottest event in town, the biggest splash, the greatest attention, the most press, and not art press especially. If a museum of contemporary art

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cannot draw a large public audience from its immediate region, never mind the vagabond art milieu, then it fails to perform its function. This function, like that of the church in medieval Europe, is public display.

The art on a church was meant to say to everyone what in Latin they could not understand. Why not now? The art at a museum allegedly modern or contemporary should have no dignifying function, meant to elevate the status of already-established reputations, but rather a publicity function. Whatever happens there is produced and invented now, by people engaged in discourse on current questions, now, with all the riot and confusion of now. No retrospectives. Not even any authoritative shows or catalogs. Not even any curator's surveys. Certainly not what has become of Documenta, an attempt by all involved to make inscriptions in Art History.

**XI** Art History is bunk. No one engaged in art should be thinking about whether they will be in Art History. That decision will not rest with the curators, or critics, or even artists. It will rest with the generals and politicians. It will rest with whoever controls the political and economic power of coming centuries. If Western or American power is in eclipse, then the art of course goes into eclipse. If there were many scholars, priests and artists once in Alexandria, the destruction of their civilization meant, of course, the end of their 'art history'. A culture is strong only as its economy is strong, not the other way around.

Which is to say.... since we are all trying to overcome mortality... if you wish to make contemporary art with highest impact and durability, then don't spend time addressing the art world. Spend time addressing the real world, the world around you, the public altogether. And don't spend time making sure that some critic or collector likes what you do. Spend time using your artistic capabilities, or your critical scrutiny, or your curatorial sense, or your architectural drive, to assure as strong and durable a material culture as possible. That means working on current problems, current issues, in current time, for the greatest vigor possible of a material culture in concurrence with the other species. As with the cave artists before, an artist earns that title only if directly engaged in assuring fertility, of the tribe, of the human race, of the other species, of the world altogether. Where are there fora, where the meeting halls and exposition rooms, where the urgent cave art of today can be seen? There, I propose, shall be the present museums of present-day responsive art.

A dealer in Cologne, despite having bought a piece of mine, once said to me that a show about the Persian Gulf at the time of the Persian Gulf crisis was incorrect: art, he explained, should not be engaged in current events; it should not be engaged in History. Oh? What are we to say, then, of Trajan's Column, or the paintings of *Jean Jacques* Louis David, or the great room of Rubens at the Louvre (more a museum of life than of 'art'), or the Ara Pacis, or the Dying Soldier on the frieze of the Parthenon? Art, in my view, should only be engaged in current events. For only there, at the centre of the stream of History, is the vitality of Life.

There are museums to save what has happened, to assure a record.

*Pen* There are museums, or rather *kunsthalle*, where full riot and tempest can occur. These should not try to assure or save anything. They should simply be congresses, meeting halls, conflict zones, stadia, in which artists variously struggle to address not just each other or an art world but an entire community around them, to restore their leadership in the formation of the material culture upon which the survival of all depends.

An artist who seeks to have 'a museum show' may as well be deposited in a morgue. Nobody in power takes a museum show seriously.

Seek the people. Speak out and show to them. If any scribes can come afterwards to inscribe what was done in Art History, that will be a consequence of the success of the people you address in maintaining a strong Economy amidst a Variety Theatre of species.

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