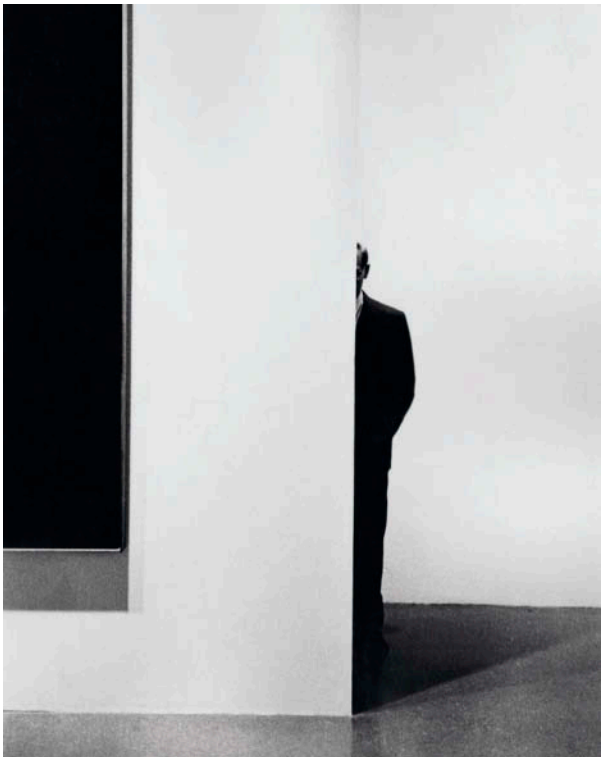
OUTSIDE THE WHITE BOX

Can art make anything happen?

By Mark Kingwell

Discussed in this essay:

Portraits: John Berger on Artists, by John Berger. Verso. 544 pages. $44.95. versobooks.com.
Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency, by Hal Foster. Verso. 208 pages. $26.95.
Strike Art! Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition, by Yates McKee. Verso. 304 pages. $24.95.



"Man Behind Wall, Museum of Modern Art," by Beuford Smith
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Ever since 1964, when Arthur Danto described the art world as a discursive space in which any object, however humble—a soup can, a garden tool, a urinal—might be aesthetically transfigured, philosophers of art have been painting themselves into an increasingly tiny conceptual corner. So-called analytic aesthetics now wallows in a deflationary phase, fighting shy of familiar questions about art and beauty. One recent exemplar of this literature, Dominic McIver Lopes's *Beyond Art* (2014), cheerfully defends a "buck-passing" theory of art. That is, art is whatever different "arts-discourses" (i.e., painting, sculpture, performance) choose to talk about and to make. In the book's terms, "*X* is a work of art if and only if *x* is a work of *K*, where *K* is an art." A general theory of why there can be no general theory is a brainchild only an academic could love.

So what is the difference that makes a difference? Philosophers are correct, I think, to avoid treating this generalized question as the only, or even the central, problem of art. Ontological identification is never a matter of simple mandarin taste—"Trust me, I know it when I see it." The point, rather, is that the baseline philosophical desire for generality cannot arise except from specific, nuanced, and temporal conditions. The philosopher Nelson Goodman, for example, suggests that we ask instead, *When* is art? This holds promise: sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes this pipe is not a pipe. When, and why, not? This inquiry is a way of passing the buck, too, I suppose, but at least in a more illuminating fashion.

Perhaps, though, the more pressing question is: What is art *for*? That might sound even less fashionable than asking what art is. But, just for that reason, it seems compelling. After all, despite the monstrous self-absorption of the art world and the philosophical dead air, people today crave and experience art in numbers unknown to previous eras. Blockbuster exhibitions at MoMA and the Tate generate long lines of patient, eager patrons. We might well wonder what these people are looking for. The works they queue up to view, whether they are small Warhols or Martin Puryear installations that can exist only in gallery settings, are either beyond collecting or uncollectible. I think the best explanation is that people want to look at art so that they can feel the way Rilke felt when looking at the archaic torso of Apollo. They want to be told: "You must change your life."

In Rilke's case, the imperative derived from beauty itself, the incomplete statue's "legendary head/with eyes like ripening fruit." Other prompts are more direct. Sometimes art is not only aesthetic but world transforming—as when Picasso's *Guernica* inflects the discourse about war and its atrocities, or Duchamp's readymades force us to regard everyday objects in new ways. In some sense that still uncannily matters, *this* is what art is for.

The terrain where art meets politics is marked by familiar controversies, though they are perhaps no longer the cause of *Partisan Review* polemics or cocktail-party fistfights, as they were in the days of Clement Greenberg and Jackson Pollock. Is art a form of therapy, populist by intention and gated only by indefensible conventions? Is art a call to arms, or to spiritual improvement, that somehow avoids the depredations of propagandism and indoctrination? No answer to these questions can ever be clean, or comprehensive, and so we are thrown, again and again, to the works themselves—with, if we are lucky, a guiding voice in our minds.

In the writings of John Berger we find a passion for art itself, for the created thing, that is everywhere tempered by an awareness of the social and political world, which too many theorists, whatever their special pleadings, simply ignore. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972)

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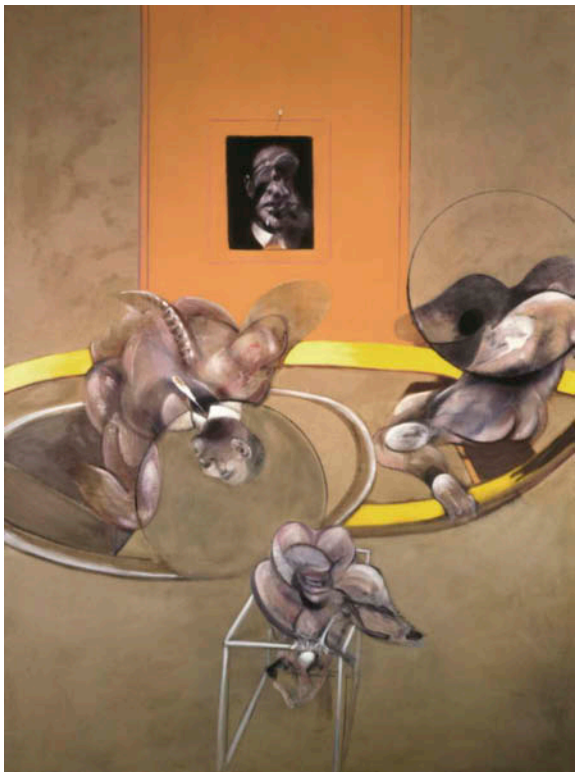

was a landmark book and television series that deployed Walter Benjamin's insights about mechanical reproduction, glamour, and "aura" to create a popular manual of critical aesthetic theory. "Glamour," Berger writes, is "the happiness of being envied." His central concern is the role of art in performing what Theodor Adorno called "seeing-through": the critical penetration of capitalism's shiny consumer surfaces, exposing the ugly machinery behind.

Berger introduces his new book, *Portraits,* a monumental late-life collection of some six dozen appreciations of individual artists, by noting that he has always hated being called an art critic. "Since I was a teenager, to call somebody an art critic was an insult. An art critic was somebody who judged and pontificated about things he knew a little or nothing about." But a critic he is: there is no procrustean bed of theory here, no elegant device to identify the essence of art. Instead, he confronts artists, from the Chauvet cave painters to current rising stars, with close, often relentless observation.

The governing idea is familiar enough: that art is revelatory of the human condition. In 1956, after being accused of political grandstanding, Berger declared, "If I am a political propagandist, I am proud of it. But my heart and eye have remained those of a painter." The defiance and the deflection are typical, though Berger's heart and eye can generate dubious claims. Is hell as imagined by Hieronymus Bosch really "a strange prophecy of the mental climate imposed on the world at the end of our century by globalisation and the new economic order"? But then listen to this: in Francis Bacon's work

> pain is being watched through a screen, like soiled linen being watched through the round window of a washing machine. Frida Kahlo's work is the opposite of Francis Bacon's. There is no screen; she is close up, proceeding with her delicate fingers, stitch by stitch, making not a dress, but closing a wound.

Above all, there is a series of claims, delivered in a pivotal essay on Vincent van Gogh, that marks out Berger's ars poetica. "All modern artists have thought of their innovations as offering a closer approach to reality, as a way of making reality more evident," he argues. "It is here, and only here, that the modern artist and revolutionary have sometimes found themselves side by side, both inspired by the idea of pulling down the screen of clichés."

The political metaphysics here are traditional, even retrograde—the philosophers of appearance and reality whom Berger mentions are Plato and Marx, who were hardly anti-foundational in their notions of what lies behind the scrim of social convention and ideological self-deception. Still, there is something impressive in a faith, shared by the artists and their viewers, that flat representations of the world can, like words themselves, reveal more than is available to the naked eye. "The first, the basic, purpose of painting is to conjure up the presence of something which is not there," Berger says.

Of course, Plato himself knew that the magic sorting of good images from harmful ones was no business for the weak-minded. Absent the benign guidance of philosopher-kings, we are cast adrift on a sea of our own perverse desires. Meanwhile, the greatest desire of them all, for a reality that we can reveal behind, beyond, or beneath what appears, is easy prey for demagogues and tyrants. The desire for truth is itself the subject of this philosophical journey to enlightenment and anticipation, those endless iterations of the utopian dream of perfect justice, which is the assumed practical payoff of grasping the Good.

What force in such dreams, then, down here on planet Earth? Hal Foster's immersion in academic art theory keeps him immune from metaphysical viruses such as belief in an ultimate reality, but he, too, maintains faith in revelation. His latest book, *Bad New Days,* attempts to recover the idea of an avant-garde after a hard half-century of infighting, obfuscation, rivalry, and successive failures to engage with the real world of politics. The background condition described by the book is a sort of doomsday landscape in which Marx's vampires of capitalism join forces with examples of what the critic Walter Robinson has called zombie formalism: unthreatening abstract artworks that are easily flipped for profit and possessed of "a chic strangeness, a mysterious drama, a meditative calm—that function well in the realm of high-end, hyper-contemporary interior design." Everything old is new again: as early as 1952, the critic Harold Rosenberg had complained of the merely decorative "apocalyptic wallpaper" generated by some abstract artists.

"Even if art is not driven toward any teleological goal," Foster says, "it still develops by way of progressive debate." That sense of progressive energy informs his claims about the "emergency" themes that have occupied the past quarter-century of art-making. Foster sees the art world as freed of specific political obligations to the socialist ideals of midcentury radicalism but still, somehow, political. His notion of the avant-garde is not directly opposed to kitsch, unlike Greenberg's influential formulation, nor does it seek a vanguard of sheer aesthetic novelty, committed to *épater le bourgeois* gestures of decadent disdain. Instead, Foster describes a sort of latent virus, "immanent in a caustic way," that infects the art world and erupts in unexpected works that will not be disciplined by commerce.

The artists who embody this possibility are a varied bunch, but they are advanced here with separate themes that

Three Figures and a Portrait, 1975, by Francis Bacon © The estate of Francis Bacon/ DACS, London/ARS, New York City/Art Resource, New York City

generate an urgent larger argument: Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith on abjection, Douglas Gordon and Thomas Hirschhorn on the idea of the archive, Jon Kessler and Robert Gober on mimesis, and Hirschhorn again on precarity. Indeed, Hirschhorn, with his "emergency library," "precarious museum," and pop-up urban shrines to philosophers (Georges Bataille, Antonio Gramsci), emerges as the book's stealth hero, the perfect artist analogue to Foster the critic. (It helps that they both revere the same philosophers.)

For Foster, as for Lacan, to look at a picture is also to be seen by it, to have one's gaze "pacified" by the structure of contemplation. "While some painting attempts a *trompe-l'oeil,* a tricking of the eye," he writes, "all painting aspires to a *dompte-regard,* a taming of the gaze." It was their refusal to be complicit in the domination performed by aesthetic representation that drove artists away from the framed, hanging picture and toward immersive, participatory, and sometimes disruptive forms that cannot be squared on a wall. The critic Claire Bishop, following the lead of theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, investigated and critiqued these approaches under Bourriaud's general term "relational aesthetics." In her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), Dada interventions and non-events, as well as insider anti-gallery antics by, e.g., Marina Abramović, are seen as forms of art-making that spill out of the usual spectatorial frame. The term "relational art" is not a happy one, since the contemplative gaze is also a relation, and a sly one at that. But the phrase has become a touchstone, at least for now, for a new generation of artists who want to break the white box.

As Foster usefully points out, however, the radicalism of non- or anti-gallery art can be wispy. Serving pad thai to gallery visitors as your artwork (as Rirkrit Tiravanija did) looks pretty much like any other gallery opening, and inviting people to a distant location to view a temporary installation seems a lot like a jolly outing. Foster, and Hirschhorn, favor more confrontational approaches. "Unlike some artists involved in 'relational aesthetics,' who often imagine a benign community," Foster says, Hirschhorn "acknowledges that his activity might result in antagonism as well as in fellowship."

Gramsci Monument, 2013, by Thomas Hirschhorn. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation

In other words, communities are not always welcoming, especially when they are organized around money. Santiago Sierra's artworks, for example—which Foster does not discuss—involve paying poor men to masturbate for the camera or to stand side by side in a line and have a continuous tattoo applied across their adjacent backs. They show, in a graphic and disturbing way, that the essence of community is the line between those who belong and those who are excluded, the freedom to say no that comes only with privilege. In a work such as *Hotel Democracy* (2003), Hirschhorn himself gently mocks the soft precarities of urban creative-class poseurs—the victims of neoliberal intellectual overproduction of degrees and aspirations, they are the very people who come to view his shantylike installations and gallery works—while sincerely questioning the value of democracy by demonstrating its constant deformation by material inequality.

Hirschhorn's combination of honest advocacy and savage skepticism might strike some as very European; its dark ironies can seem to stumble into self-contradiction. Even apparently non-luxury forms of art—you can't collect a work that will end its existence when cleared from the street by trash collectors—are revealed as dispensable, a bad joke of excess money and leisure in an unjust world. It is no accident that Hirschhorn finds in Bataille an intellectual lodestar. In *The Accursed Share* (1949), Bataille argued that any economy is governed by both scarcity and excess. Standard economic thinking emphasizes the scarcity, but it is the excess that shows the deeper truths of production and consumption, which reduce everything, including human desire, to transactions and costs, winners and losers.

The alternative to zero-sum economic assumptions is large, sudden, and disruptive gestures that function as gifts: spectacles or experiences that will not be tamed by transaction. Like the sociologist Marcel Mauss, Bataille viewed the gift as a repressed but ever-present alternative economy, one that is bound by the rules of reciprocity but not of price. Art is such a gift: unexpected, beyond exchange value, and always asymmetrically challenging. "Giving, affirming, is about demanding something of the public," Hirschhorn has written of his work. "Rather than triggering the participation of the audience, I want to implicate them.… This is the exchange I propose."

Artists believe that we cannot refuse this offering, an "obscene" gift, to use one of Hirschhorn's formulations. What does it mean to be part of its audience? The answer is obvious: *you* must *right now* change your life! Foster concludes *Bad New Days* with two critical essays that confront the realities of this challenge. In the first, he criticizes the philosopher Jacques Rancière for suggesting that art offers "configurations of experience" that can "induce novel forms of political subjectivity." Instead, Foster sounds a familiar, Adorno-inflected note of pessimism:

> That art can intervene effectively in this manner is far from clear today; certainly it is no match for image industries and information agencies, both corporate and governmental, that monitor and regulate the sensible with enormous power.

Foster condemns other views as wishful thinking or evidence of a blinkered faith that is badly in need of critical-theoretic demystification. But in his concluding essay, a seventeen-point sort-of manifesto titled "In Praise of Actuality," he suggests that a hermeneutics of belief can coexist with a hermeneutics of suspicion. There is a form of emancipation to be found even in the apparently moribund gallery experience. It is true, as Foster says, that museums and galleries have institutionalized once-subversive performance art, creating a "not quite live, not quite dead" type of artwork that has "introduced a zombie time into these institutions." The result is a combination of the moaning and shuffling of the traditional museumgoer with the frenetic instruction of an increasingly desperate discourse about the significance of what you are already looking at. "Today museums cannot seem to leave us alone; they prompt and program us as many of us do our children. As in the culture at large, communication and connectivity are promoted, almost enforced, for their own sake." Sometimes, as in the recent Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospective that traveled North America, you can hardly see the art for the distracting didactic fog of "explanation" and "context"—to say nothing of the racks of Eighties-themed gifts and overpriced hoodies one has to brave before exiting.

Foster's "actuality" is hard to pin down, except negatively. He is suspicious of playful neo-Situationist approaches that mash and repurpose reproduced images to disruptive effect. He thinks that they are at once too demanding and not demanding enough. And he does not hold with the "shaky analogy between an open artwork and an inclusive society, as though a desultory arrangement of material might evoke a democratic community of people, a nonhierarchical installation predict an egalitarian society." These ideas, he suggests, which are so often celebrated, obscure the "one service that art can still render, which is to take a stand, and to do so in a manner that brings together the aesthetic, the cognitive, and the critical in a precise constellation."

Such constellations offer us the canonical tension between the beautiful and the sublime, but with the latter now understood more precisely, in Foster's terms, as the experience of trauma. (Like torture or terrorism, the sublime makes us feel infinitesimal, mortally wounded in our insignificance.) Art can't escape the market, because nothing can, but art has the capacity to force the latter fact upon us. Maybe Rancière was right after all: the imaginative distance of artworks, their delicious stabs of revelation, cannot, by themselves, change the world, but without them the world will not change.

This notion, too, may be faith or wishful thinking, but I prefer to think of it as a necessary premise of art and its audiences. The alternative is a total surrender of the soul: not selling out but buying in. Capitalism's supporters are fond of leveling charges of hypocrisy against intellectuals or artists—Damien Hirst and Banksy have taken much of the heat—as though bringing attention to one's immersion in a sick medium were somehow self-contradictory. But these charges merely occlude the difference between capitalism as a fact and capitalism as an ideology. It is the main business of the second to make it seem as though the existence of the first were beyond question.

Does it help to think that art now exists in "the post-Occupy condition," as the critic Yates McKee has it? Maybe predictably, one of the basic claims that McKee makes in his earnest, somewhat turgid *Strike Art* is that five years after Zuccotti Park, art is enjoying "a veritable renaissance of the avant-garde." By this he means not "a canon of Great Artists of the kind sanctified by traditional art history as leading from Michelangelo to Thomas Hirschhorn" but "insurgent multiplicities engaged in a simultaneous negation and affirmation of art itself," which grudgingly accept the art world, though mostly as something in need of "unmaking," and do not endorse its past depravities. Poor Thomas Hirschhorn! Avant-garde credentials rise and fall—mostly fall—as capriciously as the price vectors on a dire collector-beware reputation website.

Once more, the normative logic behind the theory is a sort of first-past-the-post system of cultural election: I am more nimbly radical than you. McKee works hard to demonstrate that several artists of the past few years (collectives such as Arts and Labor and MTL) are continuing the work and spirit of Occupy Wall Street, but the basic maneuver of combining negation with affirmation is, as McKee well knows, neither new nor always coherent. What he calls the "art system" operates by renewing its energy at the margins, while the core is fed by elite institutions and plain old money. It's a common mistake among outsiders to think that the true enemy of art is the institutions rather than the cash.

The book's long opening example details a March 2014 "happening" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, in which the rogue Global Ultra Luxury Faction (GULF) rained down fake paper money stamped NO SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL VALUE on visitors below. But as an example of serious anticapitalist action, this event runs the risk of seeming merely silly. When it comes to dismantling the authority of Frank Lloyd Wright's Fifth Avenue landmark, some people might prefer the extended gun battle that takes place there in the 2009 Clive Owen thriller *The International*. The furnishings and the trademark spiral walkway are riddled with bullets to satisfying effect, and our hero escapes with only a flesh wound.

Like Foster, McKee name-checks Bishop, Bourriaud, and Rancière, along with the social critics Naomi Klein and Stephen Duncombe. Such overlap between two otherwise unlike-minded commentators on the contemporary art scene might suggest that their answers to the conundrum of political art are the best we can hope for. Rancière's notion of *dissensus,* in particular, is instructive: it reminds us that the soft power of implied agreement is the root of many mundane injustices.

Strike Art is, above all, a book of cultural documentation, one that relives the events and "ethical spectacle" (Duncombe's phrase) of a radical political moment that seems to be giving way, in the usual manner, to a pursuit of electoral success rather than wholesale reform. The art that McKee discusses is often transient by design, produced by collectives or anonymous bodies, and distributed freely or slyly entered into the circulation systems of the culture at large. Posters featuring the Wall Street resistance of Bartleby the Scrivener, I WOULD PREFER NOT TO, stand alongside the Yes Men, who force corporations to confront their perfidy. (They built a fake website for the World Trade Organization in 1999 that touted the principles of social justice under global trade, while another stunt encouraged corporations to buy votes directly from citizens; a 2007 keynote speech to oil executives laid out the many advantages of human fat as fuel, complete with lit candles for delegates to hold.)

McKee claims that Occupy Wall Street was itself a work of art: a participatory, temporary, and challenging happening that became a ramifying spectacle and eventually included the ham-fisted statist reactions to its existence. In a long series of rhetorical questions that makes up the book's center, he also asks about the nature of democracy: "What is the relation of the people to the imaginary of the nation and apparatus of the state?" "What is the relationship between the aesthetic and political senses of representation?" And, most important, "Does democracy remain a viable concept at all for contemporary politics?"

Art, like critical theory or political action, can only stand where it stands. There is no master key, no guaranteed revolution to match the revolutionary energy of creation. And there is, finally, no philosophy of art in the sense of a grand theory that will liberate art, and us, from perfidy, illusion, injustice. There is only the tarrying before a created thing, the temporal engagement of mind and artwork. We sometimes forget that "aesthetic" connotes the excitation of the senses, something almost physical.

Can art change the world? Well, as Romans 12:2 has it: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Democracy is the obscene gift governing a strange relational economy of individuals. We give it to ourselves as much as to others. Confronting the depth of the democratic challenge—everyone counts for one—means being thrown back into the pre-occupied condition of fellowship. Whatever else it does, art at its best mercilessly reveals our common affliction of being here together. You're welcome. ■