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It is a basic art-world orthodoxy, echoed just about everywhere, that contemporary art is ungraspably complex and diverse. The variety of contemporary forms, techniques, and subject-matter in art is indeed bewildering. The conventional media of painting, sculpture, and print-making have been overlaid with installation and ‘new media’, which can encompass anything from online art to computer-controlled sound environments. Artists cultivate for themselves images that range from traditional guru or shaman roles to beady-eyed, tongue-in-cheek chancer and careerist, and personas that include starstruck adolescent girls and engorged, axe-wielding psychotics. Art’s concerns are also various, touching upon feminism, identity politics, mass culture, shopping, and trauma. Perhaps art’s fundamental condition is to be unknowable (that concepts embodied in visual form can encompass contradiction), or perhaps those that hold to this view are helping to conceal a different uniformity.

There are several reasons to suspect that the conventional views conceal something. First, most art is instantly recognizable to both novices and the informed, and not just because it is on display in the gallery. Secondly, total randomness is one form of total uniformity. Each element of art’s variety is hybridized with others in a process that leads to a wider homogeneity. Thirdly (in tension with the second thought), as we have seen, permissiveness

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is far from total, and much cultural production is rigidly excluded from the contemporary art world. Finally, there is much current work that (like advertising) uses visual signs in a highly conventional manner. So perhaps art’s knowability is on the increase, alongside statements boasting its essential unknowability.

There can, of course, be no pretence to scientiﬁc objectivity in any account of art. No analysis can be objective in the way that, say, the examination of beetles can, since any account has some effect over the very scene that it surveys. The wide inﬂuence of Greenberg’s sweeping account of the development of modern art as a Hegelian progress towards formal abstraction helped stimulate Pop Art, its explicit refutation.

Since the rise of the avant-garde, only art viewed from a historical distance has appeared to have direction and coherence, while the present always seems clouded in confusion. This loss in the present of the orientation that we appear to have when looking at the past is a long-established feeling. In fact, those writers who, for better or worse, grasped without ambiguity an impetus in the present (such as Greenberg) have been the exceptions. Perhaps the historical mode of viewing art simpliﬁes what we see, reducing it to what is of interest to the present; but perhaps this is simply the necessary task of intellectual work in which diverse phenomena must be ordered, placed in hierarchies of importance, and much ignored or forgotten, to achieve a meaningful perspective on a scene. Such work is evident through our own period, as the art of what was once thought of as the global periphery travelled to the centre of art-world attention.

Art in the 1990s has sometimes been thought of as a synthesis between grandiose and spectacular 1980s art with the techniques and some of the concerns of conceptual art. The result was to splice linguistic and conceptual play with visually impressive objects. Tobias Rehberger’s Seven Ends of the World, to take a

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single example, ﬁlls a room with clusters of glass balloons that glow with different coloured lights in a beautiful, slowly changing display; the lights in the balloons are renditions of local light conditions in various places around the world, relayed over the Internet.

The piece is both a technically accomplished, spectacular, and appealing object and the manifestation of an idea.

Perhaps this synthesis is the result of a negative dialectic, which has forced on art not a realization but rather a taming of conceptualism’s radical critique, in a false accommodation with what it most despised. This is certainly the meaning of an installation by veteran conceptual artists Art and Language at the Lisson Gallery in 2002. Here they remade their famous Index work – originally a piece meant to encourage interaction and dialogue – as a candy-coloured functionless sculpture, juxtaposed

21. Tobias Rehberger, Seven Ends of the World

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with a nonsensical pornographic text, a reference to the antics of ‘young British artists’.

A spectrum of art is composed of the varying elements of this synthesis. One end – the most conventional and the most likely to be associated with unreconstructed notions of male genius – mixes the barest elements of a conceptual framework with large quantities of emotion, spirituality, or humanism to warrant the production of epic works. We might think here of Bill Viola, Anish Kapoor, or Antony Gormley, and (most recently) Matthew Barney. At the other end – and this is now a far commoner practice, as we have seen – concepts drive the production of objects in materials or media that are selected to suit them. Both ends react against the pervasiveness of the mass media: the ﬁrst presents the viewer with a sublime or imposing spectacle featuring massive amounts of material or (latterly) data; in performance, the body and sometimes blood of the artist form an assurance of organic and unique presence, as against all that is copied and transmitted. At the other end, mundane elements of the environment or the media are pitched into non-instrumental play: this can be seen clearly in works that take mass-media spectacle and simply remove the spectacle, a plain example being Paul Pfeiffer’s digital alteration of the ﬁlm of the Ali–Foreman boxing match, ‘Rumble in the Jungle’, to delete the boxers. Indeed, a deﬁning feature of art since the end of Cold War has been this play with borrowed images, material, and media, which has whittled away at deep, serious art of genius until its practitioners, now few, appear as eccentric survivals of a previous age, while traditionalists can only wail at the blanket dominance of ‘conceptualism’ and ‘installation’.

What characterizes this new production most is the movement of readymade objects (or at least readily recognized objects) and signs from one place to another, and their assemblage in novel reconﬁgurations. Think of artists’ treatment of that most valued of consumer objects, the car: there is Orozco’s famous La DS (1993), a

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Citroën DS cut lengthways, a portion taken out of the middle, then stuck back together to make a slimmed-down version; or Gabinete Ordo Amoris’ elongated Lada taxi (three have been welded into one) to make a Cuban taxi-limousine, commenting prettily on the peculiarities of the rise of the nouveaux riches on the island; or Damián Ortega’s exploded Volkswagen, its component parts hanging like a 3-D diagram of a kit-assembly of the car on wires. (There are plenty of other examples, from Rehberger, Fleury, Charles Ray, and others.) These movable elements may be qualities as well as things, as with Paola Pivi’s inverted jet ﬁghter, Orozco’s Oval Billiard Table (1996), or Maurizio Cattelan’s Stadium (1991), an elongated table football game that can be played by 22 people at once.

A vast range of art has been produced that contains such simple combinations of elements. To survey a large number of these is to

22. Paul Pfeiffer, The Long Count (Rumble in the Jungle)

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have the (illusory) impression of an art-world machine that takes elements out of their functional place in the world and recycles and recombines them, so that, taken as a whole, any combination of signs and objects will eventually be arrived at. Displacement is a key technique of advertising, like art, which must shock and amuse or at least intrigue the viewer; use and placement are the main elements that separate art and advertising, which otherwise remain close and engage in frequent theft from one another.

There is a structural reason for this systematic exploration of such combinations as artists compete to ﬁnd a distinctive place within the art world. As Howard Singerman puts it: ‘The [art] student’s task, like that of his works, is to take – and to mark – his or her place.’ As more and more positions are ﬁlled, it seems as if no bringing together of elements is taboo. An extreme case is Zbigniev Libera’s Lego (1996), a series of concentration camps built with the

23. Gabriel Orozco, La DS

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24. Paola Pivi, Untitled (Aeroplane)

children’s building blocks, which along with other similarly provocative works about the Holocaust were displayed at the Jewish Museum in New York in a show called Mirroring Evil in 2002.

Seen from the point of view of each artist’s individual projects such pieces are various, distinct, and personal, and each has a particular meaning. Seen from the point of view of the art-world as a system, they appear as the component parts of a uniform machine, which produces a large range of novel combinations that are tested against various publics for marketable meaning.

Lest Hume’s point – that all human imagination is nothing more than the combination of found elements – be thought to apply here, it should be said that, in comparison with modern and even many postmodern practices, these combinations have become simpler,

25. Zbigniew Libera, LEGO Concentration Camp

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their elements more manifestly found, their recombination more promiscuous and arbitrary, and the meanings that they generate more ﬂeeting and cursory. Perhaps there is a relation between the rapid play of images and the development of free trade, the erosion of barriers, historical memory, and identities in favour of the fungibility and mobility of objects, signs, and bodies.

This link with capital is generally disavowed in favour of another, more congenial reading: while in the past stylistic contradiction or inconsistency was seen by art historians as the unconscious expression of social contradictions (the locus classicus here is Meyer Schapiro’s analysis of the sculptures at Souillac), now a fully conscious enactment of these inconsistencies is used to highlight an awareness of contemporary cultural decadence. Naturally, that very awareness and its parading in works of art allow viewers to enjoy the spectacle of decadence, and assure them that mere awareness of it is sufﬁcient to bear them to a loftier plane.

This uniformity in art-making is reﬂected in prominent critical accounts of contemporary art in the mid-1990s, which should be no surprise, since the production of art and the writing which supports it are hardly separable. Even so, there is a sharp contrast between much academic writing on art and art criticism. Academic writing has tended to be caught up in the continued dominance of deconstruction, old Freudian and Lacanian models (widely discredited in other ﬁelds), and identity-based accounts. In one sense, this writing, which consists of apparently wilful readings, abounding in poetic associations and arbitrary leaps, is a reﬂection of the freedom ideally found in art itself. The writer’s performance is as creative as the artist’s. Much academic art writing, too, demonstrates a hidden uniformity, produced by institutional pressures, beneath its apparently various surfaces. The particular advantage of the dominant deconstructive and psychoanalytical accounts is that they can be arbitrarily applied to the most unlikely of works with predictably ‘critical’ results: once the method is learned, any material can be fed into the machine. Traumatic voids

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have recently been discovered even in the glib, slick surfaces of pieces by Sam Taylor-Wood. Thus the publication quotas that are institutionally demanded of academics with little research time are met.

Those writers with more of a stake in the art world, and with wider readerships, have quite different concerns. In art criticism during the mid-1990s there has been a revival in writing about the once neglected topic of beauty, which reﬂected the rise of decorative and salable art as the economy revived. In part this can be seen as a way of forgetting about issues of politics, money, difference, and elitism that pressed hard (too hard, for some) on art in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

To get a feeling for these developments, we will look at three important US writers – and here we return to the dominant centre for the consumption of art – who, despite their widely differing stances, share common characteristics: Arthur Danto, Thomas McEvilley, and Dave Hickey. All are liberal white males (so we exclude here prominent conservative complainers against the state of the arts, such as Robert Hughes and Hilton Kramer). All have wide readerships. Danto and Hickey have been associated with the renewed focus on beauty in contemporary art.

Arthur Danto writes for the left-liberal magazine The Nation and is a very well-known philosopher and theorist of contemporary art, particularly of what he sees as the break in art production set in train by Andy Warhol. If Warhol’s Brillo Pad boxes cannot be visually distinguished from actual Brillo Pad boxes, he argues, it follows that art cannot be deﬁned in terms of its visual distinctiveness, and must instead be characterized philosophically. McEvilley is Distinguished Lecturer in Art History at Rice University, and has a PhD in classical philology. He is a contributing editor to Artforum, and has done much to promote the understanding of non-Western contemporary art. He came to wide attention with a systematic and stringent critique of the

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assumptions underlying the New York Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibition, ‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth Century Art, which led to a lengthy and fractious debate with the curators. Dave Hickey, Professor of Art Criticism and Theory at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, a highly popular writer with an engaging prose style, is a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation ‘genius award’. Each of these critics brings a set of particular and extraneous interests to art criticism, as many of the best writers on art have done: for Danto it is philosophy; for McEvilley anthropology and the classics; for Hickey popular music and literature.

Danto’s After the End of Art claims that the character of art has changed radically since the 1970s and the last gasp of the avant-garde, and is now properly post-historical. Modernist and avant-garde views were tied to an idea of historical progress – towards formal abstraction, perhaps, or the merging of art and life. For Danto, in contrast, ‘life really begins when the story comes to an end’, and those who now expect art to progress have missed the point, which is that the ﬁnal synthesis has been reached. While Danto does not mention him, this stance is close to that of Francis Fukuyama’s political views in his widely publicized book The End of History and the Last Man, and is based on the same Hegelian contention that, while of course events continue to occur, History has come to a close; that we are settled for ever with a version of the system which now sustains us. Similarly, for Danto, once art had passed through the black night of the 1970s (which he compares, with its dreadful politically engaged work, to the Dark Ages), it emerged onto the sunny Elysian Fields of universal permissiveness, never to leave. And in those ﬁelds, any mixing of styles or patching together of narratives is as good in principle as any other.

We have seen that, from one point of view, this is a good, plausible description of contemporary art. It has had considerable resonance in the art world, and ﬁgures who are much at odds with Danto in other respects echo it. For instance in his book Design and Crime Hal Foster, one of the most inﬂuential and powerful academic

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writers about contemporary art, describes art’s current ‘symbolic weightlessness’ and its disengagement from history:

One might go further: contemporary art no longer seems ‘contemporary’, in the sense that it no longer has a privileged purchase on the present, or even ‘symptomatic’, at least no more so than many other cultural phenomena.

Danto wants to say that contemporary art is contemporary but that means more than merely art made now: ‘the contemporary is, from one perspective, a period of information disorder, a condition of perfect aesthetic entropy. But it is equally a period of quite perfect freedom.’ That freedom was produced by the view of art that asked philosophical questions about its conditions of existence, and was no longer tied to questions of how it looked. Liberated from the burden of that history, artists could make work ‘in whatever way they wished, for any purposes they wished, or for no purposes at all’. This is a fully utopian achievement, which Danto has little hesitation in comparing to Marx and Engels’ vision of communism, in which people freely fulﬁl themselves in the activities of their choosing.

In Art and Otherness, McEvilley’s account of the contemporary art world, global others coming into equal and full voice have undermined modernist certitudes and allowed postmodern diversity to ﬂower. Bad, old universal teleological modernism (as he characterizes it, with unnuanced readings of Kant and Greenberg) has been defeated by plural, forward-looking postmodernism, through which we can glimpse possible utopian futures. The account of modernism given here (one that has more plausibility in the US, perhaps, where the ﬁgure of Greenberg still looms) is smooth and unitary, innocent of the many variations, contradictions, and disputations that modernism used to contain. In any case, given its passing, judgements of quality – once considered absolute – may be relativized, and in doing so we can draw on the tools of anthropology. According to McEvilley:

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At moments of intense social ferment, art can serve to retard, disguise, or misrepresent a society’s potential for change. Today, against all odds, art is performing the opposite role. Tracking the future, it senses avenues along which a new self may emerge into the light of a redeﬁned history.

In such uncertain times, artists produce works that are necessarily dark, oracular, and ambiguous, a faithful reﬂection of the epoch. Part of this uncertainty is due to the emergence of multiple non-Western views, and a corresponding relativization of Western values that McEvilley sees emerging particularly from the 1980s. For McEvilley this does not mean the end of history but the end of one singular and particular view of it. The ideological totality of modernism has yielded to a glorious plurality of positions, but this is not to say that no new synthesis will emerge, only that it has not yet been glimpsed. For the time being, that is just ﬁne:

Why not let the world breathe for a while without a meta-narrative constricting it into a narrow space that is claimed as ultimate? Why not let it feel its way into the future without those totalizing, globalizing, universalizing, redemptionist myths which have so much in common with religious prophecies?

Like Danto’s, this is a cheering view of the diversity of the contemporary art scene, and it gains plausibility because, while modernism was never as simple or unitary as McEvilley has it, there has been a decided and positive increase in the diversity of voices heard in the art world. In his writings about speciﬁc aesthetic milieux in Africa and Asia, McEvilley has furthered that change and proved more sensitive to the complexities and contradictions it implies than in the broad-brush claims he makes in Art and Otherness.

Dave Hickey, too, wants viewers to relax, enjoy art, and especially to forget about the evils of the market. His book Air Guitar contains a plea to allow the arts to thrive free of academic

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brow-creasing at what Hickey describes as that speciﬁcally US invention – a ‘big, beautiful art market’ that simply and democratically reﬂects popular taste. Writing of the attitude of Las Vegas academics to their home town, he claims ‘They think it’s all about money, which, I always agree, is the worst way of discriminating among individuals, except for all the others.’ For the alternative to the market, bred in state funding of the arts and propagated in academia, is a civil-service-run, politically correct, theoretically defended culture, comprising ‘A ‘‘critique of representation’’, which, at its heart, is a critique of representative government – bald advocacy for a new civil service of cultural police.’

Hickey’s well-honed rhetoric is used to bolster the notion that ‘democracy’ is embodied in market mechanisms, so that the laws of supply and demand set the hierarchy of prices which really does reﬂect what people want from art. This view is loosely associated with the standard line of liberal thinking that says that you cannot have democracy without the market. It is another matter, though, to say that the market can act as a substitute for democracy. If that is a doubtful claim even when applied to free markets, when applied to the art market – which, as we have seen, is highly archaic, controlled, and restricted – it is foolish.

For this view to appear remotely plausible, Hickey has to believe that cultural distinction does not matter, that to look at art requires no special skill or education, and that entry into the art world is a purely voluntary matter (if you want in, you are in). It is a touchingly idealist view for an art-world insider to hold, apparently innocent of the workings of social distinction, money, and power. Hickey would have us believe that

everyone in this culture understands the freedom and permission of art’s mandate. To put it simply: Art ain’t rocket science, and beyond a proclivity to respond and permission to do so, there are no prerequisites for looking at it.

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There are elements of truth in this: the arts as a profession is not defended against outsiders in the way medicine, law, or engineering are; appreciating art is deﬁnitely not rocket science, and people can understand something about it just from being exposed to the general run of commercial culture. However, the single biggest determinant of gallery-going is education (as we have seen), and this is partly because art at all levels (from academic to commercial) deﬁnes itself against mass culture. In doing so, it regularly uses complex references to art history that require specialist knowledge of its viewers. Hickey himself, far from being an ordinary Joe, spent years doing a PhD, thus leaping over the most forbidding barrier to access.

Hickey sees himself as a fan of art, just as he is a fan of rock and roll, and there should be no more need for a fan of art to trouble themselves about it being a commodity than they would worry over the buying and selling of CDs. To counter this view, we should turn to another well-known critic who has also written much about rock – Diedrich Diedrichsen. In an incisive examination of the state of contemporary art criticism, he points to the obvious difference between fan literature and art criticism. Fan literature is written for those who are likely to buy a product, and helps them to decide whether or not to do so. As a result, it is highly focused and instrumental. Nearly all the audience for art criticism, however, have no prospect of owning the works they are reading about. The writing, too – in its specialist academic and populist versions – serves quite other functions, in which judgements of quality are either not explicitly made at all, or are made only on the basis of a subjective parading of taste. Hickey’s writing, of course, falls into the latter category.

Hickey has also recently curated an international exhibition in his campaign both to reinstate beauty and popularize art by removing what he sees as an elitist concern with political and social agendas. The show, which opened in 2001, Site Santa Fe’s Fourth International Biennial, was modestly entitled Beau Monde: Toward

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a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism. In the catalogue Hickey stated that, since what audiences remember of exhibitions is an ambience (and not ideas), he had resolved to touch everything with high spirits and a light heart. The warehouse space at Site Santa Fe was transformed with gardens, a picture window, and fantastical architectural detailing, and works were disposed in appealing vistas. Orthodoxy in biennales was the supposed target for the intended redemption. Hickey claimed they had been ‘perversely devoted to marketing ideas of regional identity and local exceptionality in the normative language of post-minimalist artistic practice’. He misunderstands what such shows are about, of course, for we have seen how they are founded on the idea of hybridity and cultural exchange, though Hickey is right about the uniﬁed language in which all this difference ends. This misunderstanding allows Hickey to recommend a cosmopolitanism in which cultural resources are mixed and which actually plays to the main presumptions underlying the internationalism he complains about. The actual contrast is more straightforwardly political and becomes clear in the following extraordinary claims made by Hickey: while exhibitions that deal with cultural identity tend to be made up of art that poses problems, the art in Beau Monde aspires to solve them: ‘the visible resolution of cultural dissonance has its moral and intellectual consequences, its social allegories, its uses, and function’. (It is curious here how Hickey’s normal facility with plain language deserts him, perhaps under the pressure of the absurdity of the claim). The mutation of the biennale in Beau Monde is an instructive one. Retaining the celebration of hybridity, it switches the standard response of the work from positive to negative, but to similar propaganda effect; the conventional biennale recommends multiculturalism and complains that old, conservative barriers to trade and cultural exchange hold back its progress; Beau Monde gloried in its current successes and the beauty they produced.

The artist Renée Green has enumerated some current art-world clichés exempliﬁed by Hickey’s thinking:

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1 Art is borderless. 2 Thinking causes over-seriousness and the deﬂation of fun and beauty, which are equated with aesthetic pleasure. 3 To think means to think too much, and is in conﬂict with experiencing (which is thought of in binary terms and is thus associated with feeling, i.e., feeling/experiencing vs. thinking).

Hickey strangely presumes that people – and educated art audiences in particular – cannot take pleasure in a demanding work, or a political work, or even a play of ideas.

All three critics, Danto, McEvilley, and Hickey, arrive via very different routes at similar destinations: that the contemporary art world is (in the infamous words of Robert Venturi and his collaborators in a book, Learning from Las Vegas, that lies at one of the roots of postmodernism) ‘almost all right’. Viewers of art should be content to bask in its glorious and unencompassable diversity.

We have seen that there are many reasons why that very diversity has become a prescribed uniformity. Bourdieu points to another: both the production and consumption of works that emerged from a long tradition of ruptures with tradition carry with them a cargo of historical references, becoming simultaneously thoroughly historical and dehistoricized. They refer to a multitude of forms but truly remember none of them, nor the conditions of their creation. History is reduced to a pure history of forms, laid out like a table from which any combination of options can be selected.

The remarkable feature of this scenario is the convergence between academic interpretations of art and those more populist writings that recommend the untroubled enjoyment of beauty. Academics who are committed to applying Occam’s Razor in reverse to any conceivable cultural problem, and critics who strive for a reasonable, measured, and entertaining clarity both favour fragmentation, the divided subject or psyche, the limits and bad faith of socially produced knowledge, and the sublime vertigo of the

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unknowable. And they do so at a time when art is increasingly dominated by thoroughly comprehensible tactics and techniques.

In any case, the plausibility of these views has lately taken a battering. Particularly since the events of September 11, the rise of overt US imperialism – with its ﬂagrant and insouciant ﬂouting of international law – strikes against the ideal multiculturalism and globalization exempliﬁed in McEvilley’s account. The return of a cogent opposition to capitalism, and with it of vanguard art, should have been impossible if Fukuyama’s and Danto’s accounts were accurate. Hickey’s boosting of beauty and the market looked good only as long as the economy boomed, and art-consumers continued to indulge themselves with pretty objects. We shall see in the ﬁnal chapter how these factors and others exacerbated existing tensions in the art-world system.