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[Dining](#)

[Movies](#)

[Music](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Stage](#)

[Television](#)

Updated daily

[Horoscopes](#)

[KidNews](#)

[Tempo](#)

Weekly features

[Arts & Entertainment](#)

[Books](#)

[Friday](#)

[Good Eating](#)

[Health & Family](#)

[Home & Garden](#)

[Tribune Magazine](#)

[WomanNews](#)

Columnists

• [Barbara Brotman](#)

• [Richard Christiansen](#)

• [Bob Condon](#)

• [Cheryl Lavin](#)

• [Steve Johnson](#)

• [Julia Keller](#)

[Travel](#)

[Registration](#)

[Customer service](#)

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Perspectives on art

A look at the creator's changing role in society and the modern dismissal of beauty as a suitable subject

By Marc Spiegler. Marc Spiegler writes regularly about contemporary art and the art market for publications including *ArtNews* and *Art & Auction*
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The Invention of Art: A Cultural History

By Larry Shiner

University of Chicago Press, 362 pages, \$35

Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art

By Wendy Steiner

Free Press, 280 pages, \$26

To those beyond the boundaries of the contemporary art world, it can often seem a befuddling and alien place. They hear about Vanessa Beecroft arraying nude models in sleek galleries and Spencer Tunick photographing masses of naked volunteers sprawled on the ground. They read about Maurizio Cattelan's "La Nona Ora," a wax statue of Pope John Paul II being struck by a meteor, selling at Christie's for \$880,000, or about the copyright-infringement lawsuit successfully filed against British phenom Damien Hirst for making a \$1.5 million statue based entirely on a children's toy-anatomy set. The litany of tabloid culture-war controversies is also endless: Most recently came Chris Ofili's elephant-dung-daubed Virgin Mary painting, Renee Cox's "Yo Mama's Last Supper" and Sally Mann's nude images of her own daughters. And what about the rampant commercialism of renowned installation artist Jenny Holzer's making pieces for New York's Helmut Lang flagship store, or demimonde photographer Nan Goldin designing limited-edition Camel Lights packs?

It is pretty hard to square all of the above with most people's concept of the "true" artist: an individualist seeking some aesthetic zenith, creating works without pragmatic or commercial purposes -- and often suffering poverty and social marginalization for such pains. Given how many current artists fail to meet that definition, it's easy to understand the widespread sentiment that they have somehow betrayed the heritage that gave us everything from Greek statues to Renaissance paintings. While museums may contain older works that the broader public understands, the contemporary art scene of galleries and art fairs seems bewildering and inaccessible.

Without denying that any number of barriers have been erected from inside the art world, some of the public's unease has roots in a lack of historical perspective. Because the simple fact is this: Like such concepts as marrying for love and intellectual copyright, the current vision of the artist's societal role is a relatively recent development. Exactly how that conception arose and evolved is examined at length by University of Illinois professor Larry Shiner in his lucid book "The Invention of Art: A Cultural History," which should be a must-read for anyone

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active in the arts, however unsettling they might find the book's implications.

Shiner starts his examination in ancient Greece, a culture that he trenchantly points out "had no word for what we would call fine art. The word we often translate as 'art' was *techne*, which, like the Roman *ars*, included many things we could call 'craft.' *Techne/ars* embraced things as diverse as carpentry and poetry, shoemaking and medicine, sculpture and horse breaking." Even almost two millennia later, medieval painters belonged to the druggists guild because they ground their own paints, while sculptors allied themselves with goldsmiths. And though we consider Renaissance painters such as Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci as the ancestors of recent masters Mark Rothko and Gerhard Richter, their working lives were more akin to those of today's ad-agency art directors than to our painters. The product the Renaissance painters were usually helping to sell was Christianity. Their patrons, either nobles or the church itself, commissioned pieces leaving little artistic license. In one contract Shiner cites, Leonardo agreed to exhaustive stipulations that even included the colors and trim of the Virgin Mary's robe.

Today, such artistic people who take aesthetic orders from clients are called craftsmen, and they are quarantined from the art world. Tracing the shifting categorizations distinguishing "high" art from "low" crafts, Shiner explains how we have arrived at the art-world model that has held relatively fast since the mid-18th Century, not only in terms of commercial structures but also in the preferred mode of appreciation: a studied (or feigned) contemplation. This would have been unrecognizable even three centuries ago. Like modern baseball's bleacher bums, the Globe Theatre's groundlings drank and fought during Shakespeare plays. As late as 1778, the Paris Opera was patrolled by a squadron of musket-wielding soldiers during concerts to keep the audience in check. The Louvre had to post signs forbidding visitors from singing and game-playing when it opened as a museum.

A critical factor in catalyzing our modern art world was the emergence of Europe's bourgeoisie, a social class with the means to buy art and a need to prove itself enlightened. Galleries sprang up to facilitate the bourgeoisie's purchases, and there also came the rejection of sensual enjoyments in favor of the more ethereal "sublime," a distinction through which artists and connoisseurs rejected the unwashed masses and hedonistic nobles as suitable audiences.

Sadly, this velvet-rope stance toward the wider world continues. How many poor souls have wandered into museums, discovered a work they found simpatico, then read the adjacent "artist's statement" and realized they had no business appreciating the piece because their own sentiments had no connection to the jargonistic confection with which the creator explained his work?

This favoring of the sublime over the sensual triggered the gradual dismissal of the beautiful as an artistic subject, a change detailed by cultural critic Wendy Steiner's recent book, "Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art."

Though its academic language and convoluted structure make it a difficult read, on the subject of beauty's pariah status Steiner nails it. As she points out, today's culturati distrust beauty. "[W]e fear its power; we associate it with the compulsion and uncontrollable desire of a sexual fetish," she explains. "Embarrassed by our yearning for beauty, we demean it as something tawdry, self-indulgent, or sentimental." (Ugliness, even dumb ugliness, is OK, however, as exemplified in the sexual Grand Guignol video works of star artist Paul McCarthy.) Good art, many critics seem to feel, should be harrowing. "Artists feel they must shock; audiences in the know feel they must applaud shock," writes Steiner. "The thrill of repulsion has become a positive and sought-after experience in itself, a nihilistic sublime in which horror, disgust, and lack of sympathy are accepted ends."

When something beautiful happens to come out of today's ateliers, it must establish its intellectual bona fides in order to pass into the sanctum sanctorums

of museum and gallery spaces. Uncontextualized beauty, after all, is the realm of fashion and design -- another quarantine area for artists. When the Guggenheim Museum in New York had a Giorgio Armani retrospective last year, it was explained by the fact that the Italian designer donated \$15 million to the museum, which rapidly found itself in the art world's crosshairs for striking the deal and validating Armani's work as art.

Originally intended as a way of making works accessible to the public for contemplation, galleries and museums have come to serve as sanctifiers of anything exhibited within their walls, even objects intended as direct rejections of the art world. The most famous example, of course, would be "Fountain," the public urinal that Marcel Duchamp tried to place in a 1917 art show. Two years ago, Christie's sold one of eight Duchamp-authorized copies for \$1.76 million. Likewise, the Dada, Constructivist and Bauhaus movements all set out to circumvent the art world's structure, and were all co-opted.

What becomes clear in reading Shiner is that if today's contemporary art world seems confusingly undefined, it's not because some structure has broken down and chaos been unleashed. Instead, this flux merely reflects the ebb and flow that surrounds cultural life. Most seeming art-world anomalies of today have historical antecedents. In the late 18th Century, musicians rarely performed written pieces, instead improvising their performances, often plagiarizing themselves and other musicians in the process. The parallels with jazz and hip-hop, two music forms that fought long battles for cultural acceptance, are clear. Likewise, the debate over the validity of new-media art echoes the long battles that brought photography and video into the fine-art fold. Artists from Raphael to Titian to Rubens maintained workshops of artistic assistants, making it just as hard to definitively decipher their own brush strokes as it is to say which works by Andy Warhol were actually products of his Factory's factotums.

It would be a mistake, however, to blame the public for the belief that contemporary artists have broken from our cultural tradition, because in fact this myth is profitably promulgated by the contemporary art world itself. With a few exceptions, such as France, the global business of art hinges on appealing to the tastes of wealthy collectors. And as a rule these collectors tend to be people who aspire to a greater intelligence and verve than the world attributes to them. They want art that's smart, and that encourages the ritual of cloaking objects in jargon - - even (or perhaps best of all) jargon the collectors don't quite understand.

They also want art that shocks. Enter the general public, since the art-world denizens pride themselves on their unshockability. With the exception of the religious right and tabloid editorial writers, of course, the public tends to be more oblivious than objecting. But once the scandal is ignited, the art-world's purposes have been served, and the general public's utility ends.

The sad thing is that more than ever, today's contemporary art could easily find a much wider audience. Having transcended the strident identity politics popular a decade ago, the scene now teems with artists from all over the globe, doing work that's all over the map. The level of international exchanges and the amount of art documented online mean potential audiences are not limited to the aesthetic of their local curators or artists. And the reference points for today's contemporary work often lie in the same pop-culture, fashion or societal trends that their untapped audiences digest voraciously--meaning most people are already primed to respond to such art.

But that will not happen as long as the contemporary art world allows its posture of rebellion to validate the accusations that it has betrayed some non-existent cultural faith. The cost of that posture is irrelevance to society at large, and it's too high a price to pay.

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