

The art public — another modernist fiction?¹⁾

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I.

When in 1979 Richard Serra was commissioned to create a public sculpture for the Federal Plaza in New York City, the artist and the GSA (General Service Administration) both agreed that it would be a site-specific work for permanent installation. Yet, after a succession of controversies involving public hearing, press campaigns, and lawsuits, in 1989 Serra's sculpture, *Tilted Arc*, was removed from the plaza. It was "destroyed" as a site-specific piece.

Immediately after its removal, Serra gave his account of the conflict in his article "'Tilted Arc' Destroyed."²⁾ Articulating a strong tension between the proprietary rights of owners vs. moral rights of artists, the text raises the issue of the dubious status of a work of art in our society. What seems most revealing is the premise of an oppositional relationship between the public vs. the art community envisaged as a majority against the work of art vs. the minority supporting it. This opposition is found also in the statements of the GSA administrators, especially William Diamond's, since they, from beginning to end, removed the sculpture under the name of the public, in order "to increase public use of the plaza."³⁾ It was, they thus claimed, public opinion that had demanded the sculpture's removal, and the government officials only acted for "the people".

Serra, in his text however, insists that GSA claim of a majority was ungrounded. With the numbers meticulously reported, he seems to have been convinced that "all public opinion is manipulated opinion." According to him, the press, in its "populist need" to be aligned with the majority, imagined or real, was mainly on the side of the government: "Over 350 articles in the local and national press perpetuated Diamond's misrepresentation, and their writers felt compelled to take the side of 'the majority' or 'the people' against the artist.... As a result, the impression that a majority of the public wanted *Tilted Arc* removed was perpetuated, and persists."⁴⁾

However, what if the numbers had been reversed and had proved that a majority actually

- 1) This article is rewritten based on a presentation at the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics in Lahati, Finland, August 1-5, 1995.
- 2) Richard Serra, "'Tilted Arc' Destroyed," *Art in America*, May 1989.
- 3) William Diamond, quoted in Serra, *op.cit.*, p.36. Other examples: "...I believe the concerns of the many employees who work in the Plaza buildings, the public they serve, and the people who reside in the area, have to be given greater weight than the views we received from members of the art community...in determining whether efforts should be made to relocate the Arc..."(Dwight Ink, in *ibid.*, p.39). "This is a day for the people to rejoice, because now the plaza returns rightfully to the people"(Diamond, in *ibid.*, p.35).
- 4) Serra, *op.cit.*, pp.37-38.

was against the sculpture? Would the artist then have less reluctantly given up his right to free expression? Although this is only a hypothetical question, judging from Serra's position on the role of the art public, we can safely infer that the answer would be "no." "People are entitled to their opinion; but prejudice, even if it is shared by a majority, ought not to be the reason to destroy a work of art.... I firmly believe that art, including art in public places, cannot be decided upon by public-opinion polls."⁵⁾ For him the right to be the "final judges of the worth" of artistic activity should not be up to the public but should be left in the hands of artists and trained art professionals.⁶⁾ Here, within the framework of Serra's own argument, the opposition between the people and the art community, an opposition which has been rejected as fictitious or manipulative, surfaces.

As revealed in Serra's text, even today the concept of an art public is a rather unsettled proposition. In general terms, the public is an elusive enough notion, often misrepresented and attenuated to an "imagined" entity. Yet the notion of the public cannot be bypassed. Without knowing exactly who they are, we all feel "compelled to take the side of the people". And, in the context of modern art, the locus for the public is especially problematic. Explicitly or implicitly, artists insist on their separation, independence, and freedom from the public, despite the fact that it is presumedly nowhere but in the public sphere that modern, autonomous art molds itself as well as its official history.

II.

As Thomas Crow points out, the public made an entry into the Western high art scene with the 18th century Salon, that is, during the period when art, having outgrown the direct relationship between artists and patrons, became secularized, and was encouraged to be "autonomous" and thereby "modern."⁷⁾ The public was expected to be a fair judge of the artistic accomplishments of their contemporaries, since, as stated in the words of La Font de Saint-Yenne, a critic of that time: "It is only in the mouth of those firm and equitable men who compose the Public, who have no links whatever with the artist,... that we can find the language of truth."⁸⁾

However, such a positive picture of the new public role⁹⁾ is questioned by Crow, who, in the debates on the Salon public, traces a history of struggle between the Academy, which was

5) *Ibid.*, p.37.

6) In order to support himself, Serra cites the words of O.W.Holmes, a Supreme Court Justice over 80 years ago; "it would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only in the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside the narrowest and most obvious limits. At the one extreme some works...would be sure to miss appreciation. Their very novelty would make them repulsive until the public had learned the new language in which their author spoke."*(Ibid.*, p.43)

7) Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1985, see esp. pp. 1-22.

8) La Font de Saint-Yenne, quoted in Crow, *op.cit.*, p.6.

9) Since Jean Locquin's classical work *History Painting in France 1747 to 1785*, Crow points out, it has been generally assumed that the public affected the history of art as "a rough audience/official consensus propelled painting away from privatized, sensual values of the Rococo style toward the revival of an elevated and moralizing classicism" (Crow, *op.cit.*, p.7).

allied with the state officials, and the public discourse, as presented by unofficial critics such as La Font. Coypel, for instance, was among many who attempted to disqualify the Salon audience from claiming public status: “I must allow that the Salon can always be filled with these same kinds of people, but believe me, after having heard them all, you will have heard not a true public, but only the mob, and not at all that public on which we should rely.”¹⁰⁾

The broad mix of classes and social types attracted to the Salon could have hardly formed a unified and meaningful body of judgement on works of high art, previously out of the sphere of most of this audience. And, although critics acted as self-appointed representatives of this audience, their eyes were not “equitable” all the time but rather tended to be blurred by their own ambitions as emerging literati. Most problematically, the public discourse, chiefly negative and slanderous, was not at all concordant with what the patrons would favor; “on one side then were private patrons whose demands were familiar and remunerative; on the other was the mob in the Salon: shifting, heterogeneous, largely anonymous, unstable in its demands if it had any, and for the most part not in the market for pictures.”¹¹⁾

In short, having to deal with the new domain of the public, the ‘art community’ of the 18th century faced a paradox. In order to adjust to the rapid change of the social/economical structure, the art world needed to open up and expose itself to public scrutiny. Yet, the public was not really a welcome guest. As soon as it had a “voice of its own,” the art world ‘insiders’ found the public disturbing to the established hierarchies that their artistic careers had depended upon.¹²⁾ Therefore, although the public was put on the top of the invitation list, the art world denied the appellation of the public to any representative who actually showed up, and thus kept the disparity intact: “the disparity between a public evoked in abstract terms and an actual audience whose behavior can only be characterized as a collection of vagrant individual responses.”¹³⁾

In some other arts, especially in theatre arts where the audience exercised their right to a public verdict vocally at each performance, such disparity did not seem to exist.¹⁴⁾ When the Salon initiated the public exhibition of art, the mode of reception of painting might have been expected to become comparable to the theatre’s to some degree. Yet, unlike the theatre audience, the Salon audience and their opinions on art “never achieved uncontested legitimacy.”¹⁵⁾ And gradually, as museums and commercial galleries have taken the place of the Salon, the categorical distinctions between arts for theatre and arts

10) Coypel, quoted in Crow, *op.cit.*, p.10

11) Crow, *op.cit.*, p.13.

12) *Ibid.*, p.10.

13) *Ibid.*, p.19. For Crow’s further argument as to how the “Enlightenment conception of the public for art” evoked an ideal, yet in large part imaginary, community for art consumption in the 18th century England and also in Clement Greenberg’s early essays, see “These Collectors, They Talk About Baudrillard Now,” in *Discussions In Contemporary Culture: number one*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle, Bay Press, 1987, pp.1-8.

14) As Crow reminds us, the success of theatrical pieces largely depended on the reaction of the audience, as was the case with the *parterre*’s power over Comédie française (Crow, 1985, pp.14-15).

15) *Ibid.*, p.10.

for museum have prevailed.¹⁶⁾

According to Walter Benjamin, architecture, epic, and most emphatically the movie have a “simultaneous collective reception (simultanen Kollektivrezption)”, in which the individual’s reaction affects the public’s mass reaction and vice versa.¹⁷⁾ Such an immediate interaction between the individual and the whole audience is not the case for painting: “Painting always had a distinct claim to be looked at by one person or by few people.”¹⁸⁾ For Benjamin, it is “against its nature” that painting had to cope with a direct encounter with the masses, and therefore, “a simultaneous viewing of paintings by a large public, as it arose in the 19th century, was an early symptom of a crisis of painting, a crisis, which was caused by no means by photography alone but rather relatively independent of it and by the demands of art works for the masses”;¹⁹⁾ “...even if attempts were made to show paintings before the masses in galleries and salons, in no way could the masses have organized and controlled themselves in such forms of reception.”²⁰⁾

Benjamin distinguishes two types of attitudes of art appreciation, “Sammlung (contemplation)” and “Zerstreuung (diversion)”, yet is not content with the antiquated view that “the masses want *Zerstreuung*, while art demands *Sammlung* from the audience.”²¹⁾ In media such as architecture and film, he argues, one’s reception of a work of art is always carried “in der Zerstreuung und durch das Kollektivum.”²²⁾ The movie, born with principally anti-auratic technical reproduction, is a medium par excellence for the type of reception which is simultaneous, collective, and unstratified.²³⁾ Painting reveals the opposite case. If the painting public has never gained the same legitimacy as the film (or theatre) public, it would merely prove to Benjamin that painting, despite its modernist claim to an autonomous status, still clings to an outmoded cult value or its fetishized substitutes, creating an artificially resuscitated illusion of distance.

Ortega y Gasset presents another important view on this issue of the art public, although his stance clearly contrasts with Benjamin’s. According to Ortega, the majority of people fail to reach an authentic experience not only in one medium of art but, as long as

16) For instance, see Selma Jeanne Cohen’s argument for the “theatrical situation” vs. the situation for the museum in *Next Week, Swan Lake*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1982, pp.141-142. As Keir Elam points out, theatre is often viewed as an exemplary of the *sociopetal* space, that is, “an area in which people are brought together (other examples being French cafes and Italian piazzas), as distinguished from *sociofugal* spaces, like waiting rooms and the offices of company chairmen, whose characteristic function is to keep people apart” (Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London and New York, Methuen, 1980, p.64). It is primarily theatres, rather than galleries or museums, that function as a *sociopetal* space where the audience is more naturally regarded as a unit, responding *en masse* to the spectacle.

17) Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (Dritte Fassung), *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften II/2*, Frankfurt an Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, p.497.

18) *Ibid.*, p.497. Benjamin admits that there was the collective reception of paintings even before the end of the 18th century, in a religious setting such as churches and cloisters as well as in a secular one such as royal courts. However, such collective viewing was “not simultaneous but in many ways stratified and hierachical”(*ibid.*).

19) *Ibid.*

20) *Ibid.*, p.498.

21) *Ibid.*, p.504.

22) *Ibid.*

23) In film, therefore, “Das Publikum ist ein Examinator, doch ein zerstreuter”(*ibid.*, p.505).

they are modern and advanced practices, in also “all the arts that are still somewhat alive in the Western world — that is, not only music, but also painting, poetry, and the theater.”²⁴⁾ “Modern art,... will always have the masses against it. It is essentially unpopular; moreover, it is antipopular....It divides the public into two groups: one very small, formed by those who are favorably inclined towards it; another very large — the hostile majority,”²⁵⁾ in other words, “the two classes of those who understand it and those who do not.”²⁶⁾

Modern art then does not really belong to the public in general but, in his words, to this “specially gifted minority”. The majority are left out only to be reminded of who they are; “the average citizen, a creature incapable of receiving the sacrament of art, blind and deaf to pure beauty”, while the elite minority are given an opportunity to “learn their mission which consists in being few and holding their own against the many.”²⁷⁾

Combined with his imperiously pro-modern and anti-populist posture, Ortega’s segregation of the people into two categories (“two different varieties of the human species”, or, “the illustrious and the vulgar”), finds a close correspondence in Clement Greenberg. In his “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,”²⁸⁾ Greenberg underlines an antinomy between “genuine culture” and “ersatz culture,” or high modernist / avant-garde art and kitsch / diversion for the “new urban masses” after the industrial revolution. Ultimately, Greenberg’s formation turns out to be just a reformulation of the tension between an elite minority and the masses, the tension which he believes would continue to exist until and unless the infrastructure of the society changes.

While “kitsch is the culture of the masses,”²⁹⁾ Greenberg argues, the avant-garde

24) José Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” 1925, (transl. Helene Weyl) in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1972, p.4.

25) *Ibid.*, p.5.

26) *Ibid.*, p.6. For a sociological analysis of the issue regarding the aesthetic disposition which serves to distinguish the different social classes, see Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (transl. Richard Nice), Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984; “Like every sort of taste, it [the aesthetic disposition] unites and separates. Being the product of the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence, it unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others” (p.56).

27) *Ibid.*, pp.6-7. On his distaste for “a hundred years of adulation of the masses and apotheosis of the people”(p.6) and “the provoking and profound injustice of the assumption that men are actually equal”(p.7), Ortega is thus even more forthright than the pre-Revolutionary state officials holding “the principle that a painting, a statue, do not belong to the public in the same way that a book does”(Cochin, quoted in Crow, *op.cit.*, p.10).

28) Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitch,” 1939, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collective Essays and Criticism*, vol 1, ed. John O’Brian, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp.5-22.

29) *Ibid.*, p.20. Whereas this antinomy later became an essentialist one, so to speak, in his canonization of modernism, Greenberg initially did make a socio-political analysis, if briefly, for the advent of kitsch and located it in a specific context; “Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy”(p.11). “The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city’s traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide”(p.12).

belongs to an elite minority among “our ruling class”. And it does so even if this small segment, the only possible audience for modernist art under capitalism, was, to his eyes in 1939, rapidly shrinking and almost nonexistent.³⁰⁾ “No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that [bourgeois] society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.”³¹⁾ Although the political context that created the heroic tone of his argument is obvious in Greenberg’s early works, the basic scheme remains the same as Ortega’s.³²⁾ In fact, as Serge Guilbaut observes, not long after this article was published: “The art of the avant-garde, modern art ... became a shibboleth of class differentiation, a minimal but nonetheless essential sign of distinction.”³³⁾

III.

The public and modern art came on the scene together, but were never hand in hand. Ever since the public was summoned up to take part of the art world, constant attempts have been made to discredit it in one way or another (“They are not the true public,” “They don’t understand art,” “They only seek easy stuff; kitsch, diversion and entertainment,”), culminating in the avowed elitism of modernist art critics. The public is either excluded altogether from the domain of high art, or divided into two antagonistic groups, where only the smaller group matters.³⁴⁾

As Carol Duncan points out, the hegemony of the “privileged few” still holds in the contemporary high-art context. “It is they who can enjoy the aesthetic detachment and the spiritual adventure that modernist art offers. They are the ones with the life opportunities and incomes that give substance to modernism’s claims of freedom. Above all, it is they who are free to transcend the conflicts of everyday life. And no other group is better prepared educationally and by situation to understand and respond to the visual cues of modernism.”³⁵⁾ “The high-art world,” in her words, can be defined as an international market, “organized around the production and use of commodities, in this case luxury

30) *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

31) *Ibid.*

32) For Theodor Adorno’s critique of both Greenbergian “bourgeois romanticism” and Benjamin’s “anarchistic romanticism”, see his “Letter to Benjamin,” dated March 18, 1936, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA, Blackwell, 1992, pp.520-523 (transl. Harry Zohn).

33) Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (transl. Arthur Goldhammer), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p.95. Here a detailed discussion is provided concerning the “distinction” that Abstract Expressionist Paintings served to bring about among American collectors in the post-World War II period.

34) Richard Serra is hardly an exception in rejecting “public-opinion polls” for art. Adolf Gottlieb, for instance, replied to a question “Whom is art for?” as follows; “It is for just a few special people who are educated in art and literature. I would like to get rid of the idea that art is for everybody. It isn’t for everybody....For the large mass of people there are other things that can appeal to them. The average man can get along without art” (quoted in Dian Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.48).

35) Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.180.

objects produced by small manufacturers.”³⁶) Moreover, in order for anything to be counted as art, it has to become visible in the market, and in the socio-economic system we have today nothing can achieve visibility without mediators — dealers, curators, critics and so on. The process in which the work “absorbs value created by the critic’s labor” is also the process in which it gains the aesthetic and the economic value.³⁷)

Negating the dominant view of modern art as a realm of freedom and universality, Duncan therefore calls our attention to the controlling power of the market over artists, that is, the power of the privileged few who control industry, education, and communication as well: “In history real artists and not The Artist as an abstraction have had to survive within the social relations of art production.”³⁸) Thus “an umbilical cord of gold,” in Greenberg’s poignant expression, still links artists and the ruling class, despite the non-existence of the direct artist-patron relationship. Thus, the discourse of aesthetic autonomy serves to obscure all extra-artistic transactions in the market place.³⁹)

Within this social system operated by the privileged few, the place left for the public, if any, is merely marginal. The “average citizen’s” participation is limited to occasionally playing the role of audience; passive, inert, anonymous, and preferably silent — although voicing one’s own opinion in those public exhibitions is no longer regarded as such a threat to the well-protected art world today. In this sense, the gap between the “average” audience and the ideational public defined by Crow as “a commonality with a legitimate role to play in justifying artistic practice and setting value on the products of that practice”⁴⁰) has grown greater.

The gap is, however, not just the generally assumed one between the real and the ideal, but more specifically related to the conceptual instability of the term “public” itself. Kate

36) *Ibid.*, p.170. In this sense, as Guilbaut puts it, “*Haute courture* and *haute peinture* are identified” for both of them are desired as a sign of cultural distinction in Baudrillard’s (and Bourdieu’s) sense. See Guilbaut, *op.cit.*, pp.92-95.

37) Duncan, *op.cit.*, p.173. While artists like Serra persist in the belief in a special status of a work of art beyond commodity status, it would be vain to ignore the controlling power of the market over artists unless, like Dada, they stop producing goods for sale: “Perhaps nothing better than Minimal documents the contradictions high artists live: the necessity imposed by the market to commodify the spirit; the artist’s impulse to protest that commodification; and finally, the commodification of that impulse to protest” (*ibid.*, p.185).

38) *Ibid.*, p.183.

39) “Patrons who once commanded such works directly from the artist now go to the free market and buy them ready-made and ready-mediated. Instead of retaining personal agents, they now endow art-history departments or fund museum exhibitions. Nevertheless, the patron’s needs remain the governing force in high-art production, although — as mediated by criticism — those needs now appear as seemingly autonomous art ideologies” (Duncan, *op.cit.*, p.182). Here Duncan implies that the notion of autonomy or self-referentiality worked to keep the status of art objects having been thrown into the free market high. For a view of how the aesthetics of autonomy was a perfect pretext for obscuring the commodity status of art objects, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford UK and Cambridge MA, Basil Blackwell, 1990, esp. pp.8-9; “The emergence of the aesthetic as a theoretical category is closely bound up with the material process by which cultural production, at an early stage of bourgeois society, becomes ‘autonomous’ — autonomous, that is, of the various social functions which it had traditionally served. Once artefacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular, and can consequently be rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves. It is this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality which the new discourse of aesthetics is centrally concerned to elaborate”.

40) Crow, *op.cit.*, p.5.

Nash defines “public” as a hyphen in Derridean terms, that is, an undecidable which is both “society” and “individual”.⁴¹⁾ This is evident in liberalist theories such as John Stuart Mill. On one level, the public means ‘society’ as an unified entity, prescribing general rules and standards and thus restricting the sphere of individual freedom; on another level, the public is admittedly heterogeneous, including different groups and individuals, which can act in opposition to society. In the first usage, the public is a monolith, transcending individuals and having authority over them; in the second, the public is constituted by various individuals who can be represented variously. Such representation, strictly speaking, only stands for a part, not for the whole. However, in many cases, the part makes a pretense of the whole and induces us to take it for the entity, as if the conception of the public in the first usage creeps into that of the second. The word “public” therefore shifts and “plays” in-between and invites diverse positions to appropriate this shifting, this rhetorical operation.

Crow also points to an issue of representation in connection with the notion of the public: “The audience is the concrete manifestation of the public but never identical with it. In empirical terms, we are confronted only with the gross totality of the audience and its positively identifiable constituent parts.... The public, on the other hand, is the entity which mediates between the two, a representation of the *significant* totality by and for someone. A public appears, with a shape and a will, via the various claims made to represent it.”⁴²⁾

Mediating between the whole audience and its parts, or, on a more general level, shifting between ‘society’ and ‘individual’, the public comes into being only when the struggle over representation lurks underneath. Representation is not possible in the first place without the process of selection / abstraction — the process of picking up something, someone, as representative, and thereby authorizing the specific part to speak for the whole, the rest silenced. It involves, as Guy Debord suggests, “the specialization of authority,” that is, “a specialized activity which speaks for all the others,” since as one voice is chosen, all the other voices are banished.⁴³⁾

As indicated by Craig Owens, under many representations of the public are hidden signs of manipulation, which diverse parties can manouver to their profit. It is therefore logical, as he puts it: “that ‘the public’ is a discursive formation susceptible to appropriation by the most diverse — indeed, opposed — ideological interests: and that it has little to do with actually existing publics or constituencies.”⁴⁴⁾ None of those representations needs to be grounded on people who actually exist, since to them as well as to anybody else nothing more than a simulacrum of the public is available.

41) Kate Nash, “Women and the Fictive Individual of Liberalism,” in *FILZOFSKI VESTNIK*, 2/1994, LJUBLJANA, p.51.

42) Crow, *op.cit.*, p.5.

43) See Guy Debord’s concept of the “spectacle” as a representation of the society; “C’est la plus vieille spécialisation sociale, la spécialisation du pouvoir, qui est à la racine du spectacle. Le spectacle est ainsi une activité spécialisée qui parle pour l’ensemble des autres. C’est la représentation diplomatique de la société hiérarchique devant elle-même, où toute autre parole est bannie,” Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1967/1992, p.11.)

44) Craig Owen, “The Yen for Art,” in *Discussions In Contemporary Culture: number one*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle, Bay Press, 1987, p.18. One of the examples Owens cites is the discourses over van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, sold at

In the name of the public — this by now so familiar phrase often functions as an ultimatum, an omnipotent means for self-justification, which suppresses any further opposing argument. Yet, the public of art is in large part an imaginary construct, having far more to do with a handful of members of the art community than an actual noncircumscribed audience. In the name of the public, or rather, under the pretense of the public, the few “representatives” construct our future art history. The “public” would thus seem to be a cunning conceptual invention, a device to conceal the fact that the artworld is, even today, exclusively dominated by a circumscribed segment of society. Like a talisman, the imaginary public keeps the real public away.

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auction in London to the Yasuda Fire and Marine Insurance Company for a record-breaking price (pp.17-18). Bitterly referring to the sale as a monument to “the new vulgarity” of “a new entrepreneurial class that has fixated on ‘masterpieces’”, a critic Robert Hughes takes the side of “the public sense of art” opposed to private appropriation. Yet, the Yasuda people, announcing their plans to exhibit the painting in their public corporate museum, also have reasoned that the acquisition was meant to show the company’s “gratitude to the Japanese people”. Another example is brought in relation to cultural protectionism of museum, “a temple to the fetish commodity,” and “its avowed purpose of protecting cultural artifacts in the name of the public”; “while the museum claims to protect works of art in the name of the public, it actually protects them *from* the public”(p.19).