ART IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT IS

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The idea of art is to change and improve the world.

*Les Promesses du passé, Centre Pompidou, Paris*

If a metaphysician could not draw, what would she think?

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Art is not what you think it is. In fact, it is not exactly an *it* at all. In modern times art is commonly taken to be a very particular kind of thing, a product or commodity believed to present, represent, or express the intentions, desires, beliefs, values, or mentalities of its producer(s): an embodied effect of those mentalities or desires. On the face of it, this may not seem problematic. Yet in fact the very idea of art has long oscillated between referring to a *what* as well as a *when* or a *how*: both a kind of *thing* and a way of making or using things. As artistry, artifice, or skill more generally, art is manifested in every aspect of social life. But not necessarily as *art*. It is everywhere and consequently nowhere: a certain degree of skill or artfulness in fabricating something is one way that *art* has been defined historically. But when and why is something properly distinguished as art within all that is artful?

Few phenomena in our lives are as inescapable as what we commonly refer to as *art* (Figure I.1). It is at once attractive and disturbing, comforting and threatening, amusing and terrifying. Art's ability to evoke adoration, passion, outrage, destruction, or death is on a par with religion's capacity to incite both comfort and genocide.
And for precisely the same reasons: both art and religion are aspects of something more fundamental and essential: complementary phenomena crafted in response to the most fundamental questions about the nature of signification and of being in the world; and about our relationship to things (the paperclip, the computer, the cathedral, the haircut).

But then again neither art nor religion is what you may think it is. They are neither universal categories nor neutral designations, but historical constructions specific to a time and place. They are not exactly *its* either, but different ways of investing things with meaning. Therein lies the paradox about them both, and the most intractable conundrum about art itself for our time. We cannot know anything about the world (or about the world of "art") without artifice.

The activity of the artist or fabricator has a long history in Western and other discussions about how to think and what and how to believe. Behind Bachelard’s statement cited above stand two and a half millennia of discussion and debate, starting before Plato’s discussion about the role of phantasm in the process of gaining knowledge. Good phantasm were those (like mathematical diagrams) that help you think; bad phantasm were delusions that caused you to think poorly. It’s not necessary to bring Plato to Bachelard but, in juxtaposing them, even a simple visual analogy gains a cultural signature, a history in Western thought (an issue taken up below).

Now compare Bachelard’s statement with the first epigram, from a wall-text of an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2010 about the function or idea of art being to change the world for the better. Which of course implies its opposite: that art may also change the world for the worse. Implicit here is another issue taken up below: the effect of art when seen as an intervention, inflection, or intrusion into social space. What artistry does, that is, in affecting existing perceptions and social habits — the actual perceiving by ourselves and others, precisely by its being there in that world.

So if that world can be changed, minimally or profoundly, what kind of effects are desired? And who controls the changes effected? Who if anyone (critic, politician, preacher, salesperson) guides the ramifications of the effected change? And where are the boundaries drawn on the efficacies of art? Is the world of art as broad as the world we know or as narrow as a set of entities or commodities of a designated type? Does “art” include the pages of the book you are reading now? Or the way you did your hair this morning? What would be a reasonable compromise (assuming you wanted to make one) between all these options?

And if it’s all “art,” what functions does a continuing faith in the specialness of (more or less conscious) artistry actually serve? The question of what art is and does offers access to central questions of contemporary thought that entail a wider range of social, political, ethical, and theological conundrums than are routinely considered in academic discussions of art.

**What Is a Manifesto for?**

A manifesto is an intervention into commonly thought assumptions. The term itself derives from the Latin *manifestare*, to make public or obvious certain principles or intentions, and it was first widely used in modern times in mid-seventeenth-century Italy. In a very broad sense we link our manifesto to structurally and functionally similar movements or developments in a wide variety of practices and traditions. All manifestos are modes of artistry and artifice in themselves. Certain well-known artifacts...
or works of artistry come to mind: Thomas More's text *Utopia* (1516), intended as a social critique but also functioning (in New Spain at least) as an actual blueprint for constructing communities where colonized subjects could congregate and be supervised in "ideal" settlements. Or the planned and actual realizations of "ideal cities" whether in Hellenistic Greece, Renaissance Europe, the Spanish missions in California, or the Mormon colonies in the North American desert. All are akin to manifestoes in that they make palpably apparent certain intentions or desires regarding a particular aspect of social life such as dwelling or organizing social classes relative to one another in space and time, or the relationship of the material world to a putative immaterial force or divinity.

The examples just noted share the utopian motivation of bringing to attention what some individual or community would wish to serve as a model or paradigm of some situation, practice, or system of relations for audiences (however they may be construed). Plato's *Republic*, composed during the early years of realizing modular city-planning designs in the colonial expansion zones of the Hellenic world — though not at home, within Plato's own Athens — projected ideal relationships between the different classes and occupations of citizens, to be mapped onto and embodied by the topography of the polis.

Renaissance paintings of ideal cities, such as the panel in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore shown in Figure 1.2, were intended for the enjoyment of an educated patron. Indeed, its artistic system of central-point perspective might be considered the paradigmatic manifestation of a hierarchically

ordered social organization mapped onto the portrayal of spatial relationships that appear to approximate human vision (the eye/l of the beholder). But does an ideal city painting really constitute a (visual, mute) manifesto regarding ideal relationships or ratios between individuals, classes, and occupations in the life of a city or community? Was it really intended as such? The answer depends on how the object was used.

The statement from the Centre Pompidou on "the promises of the past," refers to the (failed, abandoned, dismantled, or destroyed) utopian artistic practices in the "old East" societies of Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The idea or purpose of art being to transform the world and thereby contribute to making it better is perhaps a succinct example of a manifesto. A staging of a utopian activism (performance) and a way of manifesting the role of the Parisian avant-garde in supporting those artistic gestures, created in a society that repressed critique by eliminating the usual features of the art system such as funding for artists or projects, provision of exhibition spaces, existence of a standing audience for art. Social critique was suppressed in any form, yet art-making continued (indeed even flourished) under these harsh conditions. Moreover, it evolved as a non-commodified form of practice.

The exhibition *Les Promesses du passé* might be taken as the emblematic claim of art itself in modernity — as the instilling of possible worlds; as installing into the fabric of the world of the everyday (an)other world, thereby (and not so incidentally) problematizing or de-naturalizing what is habitually taken as real or natural. Art as exhortatory — as manifesto: the manifestation of artistry and artifice as such. The manifestation of its own questioning gesture. What has been recuperated as a pan-human sign of humanness functioning in the interstices of an authoritarian social structure where the role of art (paradoxically, ironically) is free because it functions without being commodified outside the art system — where every person is potentially an artist who manifests his or her own "style" (Figure 1.3).

A manifesto, again, is a form of social practice; an activity of asserting some paradigmatic, ideal, or preferable set of relationships — who lives where in relation to others, for example; who is permitted to speak to whom under what conditions and with what obligations and responsibilities; who are permitted to marry whom or to practice as artists or judges in a community; who are allowed to publicize their (political, economic, religious, philosophical, social) manifestos, at Hyde Park Corner, in Central Park, or on the Internet. In which case, then, any declaration of principles,
form bear relationships to the actualities of some situation or set of circumstances that are akin to that between (on the one hand) a design or plan and (on the other) both the perceived or imagined state of things as currently existing, and as ideally embodied, cured, corrected, or completed. In other words, a manifesto entails an (implicit or explicit) interrogation of concordances (actual or imagined) in a perceived state of things. It calls for actions and consequences.

Not everything is a manifesto, but many kinds of things, many activities, and not least artistry itself under its many guises, may be used to effectively and provocatively manifest or declare what is to be done. If artistic practices potentially have profound philosophical or religious ramifications by enhancing, refuting, or simply making possible any belief system in the first place, they also have profoundly political effects simply by the fact of their being there in the (actual, imagined, or virtual) world. In other words, any artistic act, however minimal, and using whatever means, has effects. Furthermore, its effects may not be manageable or controllable by the maker. This then has profound implications for what art is and does. However we construe the term, whatever we take to be its "idea," art is not simply a problem, it is one of the most profound of all problems at the heart of social life. This situation is even more complex in that art is not quite reducible to any one causal agent, whether understood as social mores, ethnic makeup, or the psychology or organic architecture of the human brain.³

What would it mean to question — indeed to trouble, as a manifesto properly should — what has conventionally been taken in the Western tradition and elsewhere to be the very idea of art? What exactly is art if it could have problems that require urgent attention? Is some art by contrast really unproblematic? Contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben once claimed that if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time, nothing is more urgent than clearing away what is usually taken for granted about it, calling into question everything that aesthetics entails, including above all the system of relationships in which it has been embedded — framed — and which gives it its substance, namely the split between the artist as producer and the beholder that defines the way we currently use art in society. Is the social subject (whether the artist or the viewer) enhanced or, more fundamentally, formed by this framing? What would be gained by exposing — manifesting — underlying assumptions of what are commonly taken to be the nature, functions, and aims of what we call art? In the current debates, another contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière
has been a leading voice in calling these very assumptions into question. What Rancière calls the "aesthetic regime" of art maintains as its foundation a historically reductive understanding of art as autonomous. He has called for a broader, more nuanced understanding of what art is and does, a philosophical project that defines the "future of the image" in terms of a heterogeneous community of dissenting equals. Rancière's project resonates with our own call to arms.

The modern Western idea of art is that it is primarily an expression, representation, embodiment, or sign of the intentions of its producer: a figure, profile, or emblem of the (inner) truth(s) of the maker. Historically, the latter has variously referred to the person or persons who materially fabricated the work; the product's sponsor, enabler, agent, or promoter; or the system of artistic or cultural production itself, the social and cultural environment within which it appears and functions. It may include a particular person, people, place, or time, or specific social, historical, philosophical, or theological forces, intentions, or desires said to be "behind" or manifested in (and as) the work. The enterprises of modern forms of knowledge production such as art history, art criticism, aesthetic philosophy, and museology — as well as their many ancillary or subsidiary formations such as the heritage, travel, and fashion industries — are all dependent upon the fundamental hypothesis: the accepting as natural, given, or in other words beyond discussion, of a certain concordance between what are distinguished as cause and effect.

Therein lies the enduring paradox of the dualistic distinction between a work of artistry and the forces or circumstances that are thought to have brought it into being, between an artifact and its cause. While those forces can be imagined to be prior to and ontologically independent of their effects, in practice their concordance is nonetheless fragile and problematically circular, and ultimately indeterminate. Moreover, how things are to be understood or interpreted, or even merely seen and read, requires external justification and support, including legal, religious, and social enforcement. The governmentality of art and its role in fabricating socialized subjects requires substantive consideration.

The presumption of such a concordance has explicit philosophical and theological roots in many societies. Our intervention into the age-old debates about the nature and function of art concerns their epistemological structure. How have arguments about art been articulated in the Western tradition? How do these historical ideas impose on current understandings of what art is and does? According to some belief systems (and not only

their monotheist varieties) the universe as a whole is actually pictured as being a creation, requiring an artist or maker (sometimes but not necessarily individuated) with an existence or agency independent of and thus seemingly logically prior to its creation. The cosmos thus conceived is likened to a material work of art or human artifact, an allegory wrought large of a certain (and necessarily culturally specific) idea of art. Artistry and metaphysics are inextricable in culturally specific ways.

The modern idea of art (fine art) is in fact structured according to ontological distinctions between subjects and objects, between "sentient" producers or agents and the material effects of production which are commonly assumed (in some traditions) to be non-sentient: a linkage (through distinction) between mind and matter, a juxtaposition of thought and stuff. Paradoxically, in many traditions, those productions, whether construed as events or as things resulting from events, are treated as if they were sentient. The idea of art, as something antecedent to a world of art objects as exemplifications of that idea, turns out to be a very complex and problematic notion. It would seem that there is no idea of art that is not tied to a certain metaphysics. In the Western tradition, the work is commonly construed as a sign that is, as form or idea (from the Greek eidos) of something pre-existing its manifestations or exemplifications. Within the Christian religious tradition, where theoretical considerations about images required a very intensive and profound reckoning with older Greco-Roman philosophical perspectives, the central problem was that of guaranteeing the truth of re-presentations of the ineffable, immaterial, and eternal.

A quick example: within that tradition, broadly conceived, the most sacred object was the relic, understood to be the direct manifestation of the divine, made without human intervention. The understanding of the artist as the agent responsible for an image of Christ or another sacred subject introduced an ontological problem: what guarantees the (divine, eternal) truth of a representation made by human art?

The fundamental problem lies with the binary or dualistic nature of the paradigm, whether called form versus content, the immaterial versus the material, or some other combination assigning a higher value or reality to that which is taken as prior. As powerfully articulated by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century and repeated many times since as the central epistemological challenge of contemporary thought, there is no meaning independent of the words or signs used to designate them. In such a view, there can be no transcendent meanings, no ideal significations, no privileged reference, no universal equation or concordance between designations.
and things. No “divine” principle of intelligibility, in other words; no final meaning or truth that is not itself an artifact of signifying practices themselves.

Reckoning with the metaphysical subtexths of Western philosophy has been one of the most formidable problems of contemporary thought: the duality of form and content is a specifically Western configuration which leaves open the possibility of transcendence — since the duality maintains that there is something beyond and prior to the material manifestation or embodiment (or “re-presentation”) of the idea. How to rethink that transcendence while also considering the situation of art in a globalized economy, with all that it entails, is the key challenge for contemporary writing about art as such.

Who Are We and Why Are We Writing This Book?

This book is by a couple of art historians and theorists who have just spent many months in another hemisphere half a world away from home and normal professional haunts precisely to get a fresh slant on the idea of art. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Blackwell Manifestos series intended for a broad spectrum of readers because it impels a broader picture than disciplinary protocols and institutional obligations normally encourage. As a result, much in this book is aimed at dispelling historical amnesia and troubling the fantasies that promote art as a form of escapist entertainment: entertainment as containment. No art system is a self-enclosed, self-regulating environment. Sensitivity to this circumstance is heightened by living in impossible and dangerous times, in capitalist societies where the gap between populations and their tiny ruling minorities is widening grotesquely, where the financial interests of large corporate entities effectively control political life, while humanly induced climate changes affect the quality of all life on our beautiful blue planet in ways not fully comprehensible at present, if they ever will be.

Interventions are urgently needed in the public sector to voice not only the immediate consequences of inaction in the face of environmental and social disaster, but also to articulate issues of social justice persuasively. Our decision to situate ourselves in the global South of Australasia was driven by the desire to understand how the Euro-American axis of the art system offers only a partial perspective of a global network.

Our outsider’s perspective on both Euro-American and Australian art made us aware of what Michel Foucault calls the processes of recuperation, the recasting of prior representations in new form. We learned something uncanny about the contemporary effects that the historical, initially European idea of art has produced. Australia was a final chapter in the European colonization of the rest of the world, with the main campaigns of settlement taking place in the nineteenth century. By this time, one might have expected that the medieval scheme of the European imaginary consisting of the civilized self and its exotic other would have been exhausted, having been replaced by more nuanced appreciations of cultural difference based on centuries of exploration and interaction. Yet the facts suggest otherwise. By the end of the eighteenth century, an international discourse mounted in Europe had established indigenous peoples as examples of primordial humans, with Australian Aboriginals considered the most primitive of all, playing the role of Europe’s Old Stone Age peoples. Nineteenth-century reconstructions of Neanderthal physiognomy were actually based on comparisons with modern indigenous Australian specimens, the anatomical evidence reinforced by circular arguments about the “primitive state” of Aboriginal culture. The most widely known “reconstruction” was by comparative anatomist Thomas Henry Huxley, entitled Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature (1863), published in support of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution nearly a decade before the appearance of The Origin of Species (1871) (Figure 1.4).

Progressive science in Europe situated indigenous peoples in Australia and elsewhere at the bottom of an evolutionary and cultural hierarchy that was fully elaborated only in the 1920s. The label “primitive” is still difficult for many to dismiss regarding indigenous Australian culture, and the current living conditions of First Australians, the sorry aftermath of European colonial policies, are an ongoing tragedy and national embarrassment. Yet these harsh historical and contemporary conditions also produced an unexpected corollary: Australia and New Zealand (where a consolidated group of Maori leaders struck a somewhat better deal with their British colonizers at first contact) are also the source of some of the most sophisticated and thoughtful critiques of culture available anywhere. This includes a fundamental rethinking of art-making in phenomenological terms as a form of knowledge production involving complex bodily interactions with the immediate environment. The work of American anthropologist Nancy Munn and others studying indigenous cultural practices in Australasia
suggestions ways to rethink the highly charged European category of art in culturally less biased terms, as we’ll discuss in the final, Eighth Incursion of this book.

This book is organized as an interwoven series of incursions into multiple aspects of the contemporary discourse on the arts. Incursions aimed at making palpably manifest the contradictions, conundrums, and consequences of the normative systems within which ideas about art appear and function today. These are critical forays into the ways that art/artistry/artifice are regarded. They are concerned with art (as commonly construed today) as a problematic phenomenon. Not merely art and its problems, but the quandary that is art in today’s society. The seven essays below present overlapping, mutually implicative, and mutually supportive perspectives to focus attention on what is at stake today in maintaining the contemporary global system of the arts.

The function of the critic continues to be situated partly inside and partly outside the art system in which commodities circulate, with the academic practices of art history and the professional practices of curating exhibitions and writing art criticism. At present, critique is an endangered species, practically non-existent in the commercial art world where most of what passes for art criticism is actually artistic promotion. On the other hand, some artists are also practicing as critics of the commercial art system, sometimes by abandoning object making practices, sometimes by acting as curators or writers. This situation in itself makes it impossible to separate the art system from its critical frame or from its political contexts or effects – even art that has no political content is political in refusing to be politically engaged.

How This Book Is Organized

It is not a question of applying a concept but of enabling a thinking. Parveen Adams

This book is not a history of the contemporary discourses and practices of art criticism, art history, aesthetic philosophy, or museology. Nor is it an account of particular art movements, styles, or modes of art production, staging, marketing, and academic art criticism. Nor is this book limited to discussions of modern or contemporary art. It is the matrix itself – that topology of relations between differing ideas about the artist, the artwork, and their functions – which is our subject. To understand art as part of a matrix, rather than simply as a thing, a process, a skill, or even a way of using things, this critical intervention looks at the longer history of the modern idea of art, particularly its foundational moments in the sixteenth century. If, as Terry Eagleton argues in the first volume in this series of Manifestos, *The idea of Culture* (2000), the cultural is what we can change, then art is what changes those (not so gracefully aging) Enlightenment twin siblings, *culture* and *nature*, precisely by problematizing the naturalness of their distinction.

The ideas of art and culture are inseparable. Eagleton claims that the vision of the world made up of unique, self-determining nation-states, each carving out its distinctive path to self-realization, is not merely akin to aesthetic thought: it is an aesthetic artifact. The work of art, he argues, is modernity’s solution to one of the nation’s most difficult problems: how to relate the particular and the universal. The artwork promises a new way of conceiving of that relationship by representing a kind of totality that exists only in and through its sensuous particulars. The state can represent the unity of culture only by repressing its internal contradictions: a masquerade of aesthetic decorum.

In order to begin discussing our contemporary ideas about art and artistry we must first counter the assumption that the modern idea of art began with German Idealist philosophers such as Immanuel Kant or G. W. F. Hegel. Although it may be widely (and vaguely) appreciated that our familiar modern ideas about art were not conceived *ex nihilo* in the
eighteenth century, the attention accorded to earlier (mostly European) thinkers in discussions of contemporary art has tended to resemble the reluctant toleration accorded to so-called primitive societies outside Europe by those nineteenth-century scientists and philosophers who were bent on creating the parochial fiction of Europe as the brain of the earth’s body. By contrast, the discussion here begins with religious ideas about art that precede the Enlightenment philosophers.

The religiosity of the modern idea of art is structural and systemic. To paraphrase a recent observation by Judith Butler, if we take “secularization” as a way in which religious traditions “live on” within post-religious domains then, with respect to the art matrix, we’re not really talking about two different frameworks, secularism versus religion, but two forms of religious understanding intertwined with one another. The old structure about the relationship of artistic representation to divine truth continues to haunt and trouble contemporary ideas of art.

**Incursions into the Idea of Art**

These incursions into important facets of the idea of art are doubly layered, consisting of seven narrative texts and references to further readings. In some cases, the latter are fairly extensive and are meant to offer the reader links to further aspects of the arguments.

The First Incursion ("Artistry and Authorship") pays attention to the other side of the Enlightenment, to lay out the background of contemporary understandings of the idea of art. Going beneath the increasingly opaque glass floor of the European Enlightenment, this incursion looks genealogically at the topology of relations between artist, artwork, and the aims and functions of both. It considers some of the important ways in which Western Christian religious uses of images and ideas of authorship and responsibility in the Early Modern period (ca. 1400–1700) provided a structure or template for subsequent post-Enlightenment "secular" understandings of art, artist, and artwork.

The Second Incursion ("The Dangers of Art and the Trap of the Visual") looks at specific historical reasons why artifice constituted a potential threat to hegemonic religious power and social discipline in sixteenth-century Europe and its expanded field of surveillance beyond the subcontinent. From the standpoint of religious institutional authority, the driving issue has not been the freedom of the artist per se but the problem of securing the truth of an artistic representation. This incursion then reconsiders the category of the visual in promoting the modern European nation-state and the still circulating, now highly commodified idea of the artist as Romantic hero in a longer (and more complex) historical trajectory than existing accounts of contemporary art usually recognize.

The Third Incursion ("To See the Frame That Blinds Us") looks at the art system obliquely from the orbits of contemporary Euro-American art-making, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics. A series of interrelated case studies of Australian Aboriginal painting clarify what was forgotten, erased, or occluded in early European modernity’s invention of (secular) art. Aboriginal acrylic painting, which had its origins in the 1970s, rapidly assumed international artistic and commercial prestige. The creation of Aboriginal art for an international market is poignantly paradigmatic of the modernist commodification of (fine) art in a very specific sense: as the abstraction and extraction – the reification – of particular visual or optical properties of indigenous cultural practices. The effect is to make such abstractions consonant with late modernist (Western) artistic formalism which has its roots in Christian theories of images.

The Fourth Incursion ("Deconstructing the Agencies of Art") continues the discussion of artistic agency by considering the effects of recent collaborative practices among artists who engage communities in ways other than as creators of aesthetic commodities. The recent phenomena of international biennales and community-based art practices help to articulate ideas about artistic agency as distributed rather than authorial. The political and ethical implications of these practices on the role of art in society are potentially profound.

The Fifth Incursion ("Intersections of the Local and the Global") looks closely into the epistemological and semiological implications of the previous forays with respect to ideas about causality and the nature of artistic signification within the European tradition. How is describing a society from the “inside” different from describing it from the “outside”? This incursion is located on the border between the critical apparatus of academic discourse and the extra-European cultural productions it describes. It addresses prospects for a “unified field theory” of artistic signification at the heart of the art matrix – as debated in two recent and seemingly very different claims in anthropology and art history, one by Alfred Gell and the other a collaborative forum for a world art studies.

The Sixth Incursion ("Into the Breach of Art and Religion") explores the relations between art and religion in three registers. First, stepping outside
the art system proper. In connection with the recent Muhammad cartoon controversy, this incursion examines contradictory notions of signification that exist between artwork and audiences in heterogeneous viewing situations. Second, regarding a recent altercation between the Hopi Tribal Council and the Warburg Institute of the University of London, it considers the presence of antithetical systems of value about the transmission of cultural beliefs. Finally, it looks at Plato’s discussion of the proper place of the arts as an enduring conundrum underlying the necessity of maintaining social order.

The Seventh Incursion (“The Art of Commodifying Artistry”) examines the mechanisms by which museums transmit cultural beliefs. The particular uncanniness of museums of art is due to the fact that their content and ways of staging and framing that content seem at times virtually indistinguishable. Citing examples from New Zealand and the United States, this section argues that the conflation of art and the artistry of museum display is structurally present in any museum. It then reconsiders the relationship between autonomous art and the commodity form, a long-standing problem of modern aesthetic philosophy and one of the central questions of contemporary culture and politics. This concluding provocation considers other ways to frame art-making, as embodied, multimodal cognitive processes functioning in distributed, local networks of agency.

By the same token, this project also functions in a distributed network of agency. In 1972 Gregory Bateson framed the intellectual challenge in the following way:

My goal is not instrumental. I do not want to use the transformation rules when discovered to undo the transformation or to “decode” the message. To translate the art object into mythology and then examine the mythology would be only a neat way of dodging or negating the problem of “what is art?”

To take Bateson’s articulation of the problem one step further, we neither dodge nor negate the problem of “what is art,” but interrogate the grounds for believing in art as a what or a when or a how.

Notes


Further Reading


Ideas about the artist, the artwork, and the uses and functions of both are neither self-evident, nor fixed, nor universal. They are facets of an evolving topological matrix of relationships in which what appears natural at a given time occludes earlier relationships that continue as ghosts haunting the present. This incursion argues that art cannot be adequately understood apart from its position in that matrix.

I walked around the room, snooping in corners, and discovered a plastic crate full of ten-inch-square mushroom paintings. Murakami has created four hundred different mushroom designs, so the exam given to new staff to test whether they are ready to wield a brush in his name is to paint a mushroom. . . . On the ground, leaning against the wall was another battalion of works-in-waiting. A total of eighty-five canvases were on the way to becoming what Murakami casually calls “big-face-flowers” but are officially titled Flowers of Joy. Gagosian Gallery sold the fifty on display in its May 2007 show for $90,000 apiece.

Sarah Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World

Few artists work on the scale of Takashi Murakami, but the few who do depend on an enormous, dispersed network of museums, galleries, curators, dealers, agents, collectors, critics, art magazines, corporate sponsors,