

The Next Thing

CHAPTER SEVEN



Art Futurecast: Merging Object with Subject

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I. Three ArtExplorers

Objects turn into subjects *if and when* they interact with viewers. If a thing or object *seems* to exchange messages with humans, it can be seen as anthropomorphic or metaphorical. Beyond that, can a thing live a life of its own and even change with seasons and eras? This is increasingly possible in art and is a new way to engage viewers in humanist, geopolitical, scientific, and socioeconomic concerns. I developed the idea that objects may become interactive subjects during the course of studying three international artists with differing backgrounds and objectives. It faces challenges from both modernist and social practice directions (as will be discussed in part II). Jean Baudrillard captured the modernist view in *Utopie*:

People took “simulation” for postmodernism, and I became a guru of postmodernism. . . . In regard to this controversy, . . . it is clear that I resisted this kind of architecture. I remained modern in the sense that I refer to Manhattan, in its truly modern version. . . . In my eyes, the referencing of past forms incarnated a movement that was not only a regression, but also a reversal. I did not see it as a sign of renewal in any way, but more as bricolage at the highest level, reusing all past forms.¹

¹ In the social practice field, Nicolas Bourriaud has argued in “Meaning and sense are the outcome of an interaction between artist and beholder and not an authoritarian.”



For this chapter, “art” is work that has a sensory or physical manifestation in any media, is original, and somehow gives viewers a “new” experience in the reference frame of their time period; “object” is a thing (that may be acted upon); and “subject” is a person, thing, or idea that acts or suggests action. These are basic syntactical definitions and not semiotic terms. First, let’s examine how objects become subjects in the work of three artists.

In artist Katrín Sigurdardóttir’s (Icelandic, born 1967) exhibition *Boiseries* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, visitors in one gallery see themselves mirrored inside a full-scale model of an eighteenth-century room from the Met’s period rooms. In a second gallery, viewers stroll along the deconstructed walls of another life-size eighteenth-century room that becomes progressively smaller and smaller.³ In each instance, *the visitor*, self-consciously or not, *enters* either the literal or the figurative space of the object and (himself or herself) *changes in scale*, becoming smaller or larger in relation to the object.

Sigurdardóttir’s *High Plane V*, 2006–2007 at P.S. 1, the contemporary branch of the Museum of Modern Art in Long Island City, added a third interactive element. (See figure 7.1.) Viewers queued up to climb one of two super-tall ladders. Upon reaching the top, the two people found square openings big enough for their heads to become part of a horizontal landscape of powder blue land masses—abstract forms *simulating* snow-covered mountain ranges, lakes, and islands. *At the same time*, viewers could see each other’s heads *in real time* and distance and *out of scale* with the miniature landscape. The suggestion that our world and its countries are shrinking and that our heads are getting bigger was one of many interactive messages viewers might see. Upon descending the ladder, these viewers, like the narrator of “Plato’s Cave,” might not see their familiar world exactly the same way. *High Plane* behaved like a subject rather than an object, immediately connecting with viewers, one on one, and engaging them, individually, in conversations to interpret what they had seen.

Sigurdardóttir’s ideas are original interpretations of the social practice theories of Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, with added ideas from her graduate studies, including feminist theory, at Rutgers University. Bourriaud’s defines *art* as “a general term describing a set of objects presented as part of a narrative known as *art history*.”⁴ His subsequent books *Radicant Art* and *Postproduction* suggest that the term *art* is elitist, establishmentarian, and needs to be replaced. Instead of *art*, he suggests “a voluntary confusion of eras and genres,” a “significance that transcends cultural divides,” and “recontextualizing” existing ideas and objects.⁵ Sigurdardóttir related, “*High Plane* does merge subject and object—you become part of the work. There’s a performative element in everything I do. The work is activated by the body. You are seeing *how* you are seen yourself—but not (seeing) yourself.”⁶

Following his undergraduate studies in architecture at the Ricardo Palma University in Lima, and masters and PhD studies and degrees at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, César Cornejo, born in 1966, set to work as a multilingual artist who translates sociopolitical issues in his native Peru into international contexts to interrelate culture, architecture, art, and sociology. The ideas of Frederick



Figure 7.1. Katrín Sigurdardóttir, *High Plane V*, 2001–2007. View from PS1.

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Kiesler (1890–1965)—whose *The Endless House* proposes merging architecture and sculpture—were one important early influence on Cornejo’s work. Kiesler’s theories about interrelations among space, people, objects, and concepts were far ahead of his time.⁴ Another important influence on Cornejo’s approach to sculpture-architecture was his Lima university professor, the Peruvian sculptor Carlos Galarza Aguilar (1926–1991). Aguilar tried to fuse architectural design with an expression of Inca architecture; he encouraged students to make sculpture like buildings and buildings like sculpture.

Cornejo’s ongoing long-range project is creating the Puno Museum of Contemporary Art. Puno, a mountain village where historically significant Inca and pre-Inca Tiahuanaco, Colla, and Pucara cultures originated, is impoverished and remote. Working collaboratively with Puno residents, he helps them add an architectural space to their traditional houses; for an agreed-upon period, they use this as a gallery showing contemporary art. The museum project, initially funded by New York-based Creative Capital, allows residents to improve their dwellings, exposes them to contemporary art, and encourages interactions among tourists and visitors, city residents, and artists with varied backgrounds. Three of twenty-five stated goals of this program are:

1. To transform the city of Puno into a living museum in which the city as well as the residents are part of the exhibition.
2. To create programs that allow the museum to play an important role in the local socioeconomic development.
3. To create programs that value environmental and ecological aspects in the region.

Cornejo’s art and architectural skills and his hands-on approach to implementing this plan, house by house, are notable. The artisan traditions in Peru can be incorporated as well. Subject and object become one, since the home’s inhabitants, the architect (in this case, Cornejo), the artists exhibiting work, and any visitors to this historic region exchange ideas. The new museum, as part of the house, improves and interacts with its other spaces. The house museum offers anthropological, cultural, and economic exchanges on many levels—and in many directions. This project has art and art historical antecedents in Belgium and in Argentina.⁵

For another project in 2005, Cornejo created *La Cantuta* to commemorate the July 18, 1992, kidnapping, torture, and murder of nine students and a teacher at Universidad Nacional de Educación Enrique Guzman y Valle (also known as La Cantuta) by a government death squad. Their bodies were found buried at the outskirts of Lima, and Fujimori government officials were later tried and convicted for this crime. (See figures 7.2 and 7.3.) However, a planned public monument was never built, and even thirteen years after these murders, it was radical to use art to publicly mourn this loss of life. Cornejo’s project involved more than a thousand participants, including students, professors, and relatives of victims, making sixty thousand black paper flowers to commemorate *all* victims of violence in Peru. *La*



Figure 7.2. César Cornejo, Project Puno MoCA,
(2007 – ongoing)

Used by permission of the artist.



Figure 7.3. César Cornejo, *La Cantuta*, Installation,
2005.

Used by permission of the artist.

Cantuta consisted of nine flower-covered student desks and one teacher's desk in a setting landscaped with the black flowers. By creating art that involved over a thousand people remembering the dead and that permitted commemoration during a repressive period when this behavior was risky, this project was always "the subject," never an object. It was a collective memory brought to life. It was also a synecdoche, a microcosm of mourning for a nation that is still afraid to mourn.'

Ursula von Rydingsvard, born in Deensen, Germany, in 1942, spent ages three to eight in eight different post-World War II refugee camps for displaced Polish people in Germany before her family was relocated to Plainville, Connecticut. Her childhood is one basis for the monumental cedar work that variously evokes her Polish heritage, children's games, and family. Her art career took off during and following her masters of fine arts studies at Columbia University (MFA, 1975). Von Rydingsvard has an honorary doctorate from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore (1991); her awards include the 2011 Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture and a 1994 Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.¹⁰ Her third retrospective exhibition, *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Sculpture, 1991–2009*, had four venues through August 2012.

Von Rydingsvard's abstract cedar compositions sometimes allude to the body's innermost yearnings and to art's multiple layers. At other times, the artist's abstract vessels are constructed into towering "vernacular architecture" that seems both ancient and timeless. Von Rydingsvard's signature construction methods start with cedar processed into standard 4" × 4" construction lumber. The artist then marks the wood and cuts it with a circular saw. She creates stacked abstract forms; glues them a layer at a time; and often finishes the sculpture with graphite. Von Rydingsvard's resulting abstract objects range from giant necklaces to lace medallions to an unidentifiable creature named *Luba* to a tornado-shaped, threatening conical mass named *Ogromna*. *Artforum* described von Rydingsvard's *Blackened Word* (2008) as "an enormous, rippling accumulation of cedar and graphite, [that] brings to mind the ruins of Angkor Wat as they appear in the final scene of Wong Kar-wai's 2000 film. . . . *Blackened Word* unfolds as one walks around it, a hulking shape irregularly darkened with graphite and cleft with creases, dips, and fjords, some roomy enough to accommodate an arm or a small torso, some just big enough for a probing finger, or less."¹¹

Wall Pocket, 2003–2004 (Collection of Museum of Modern Art, cedar and graphite 162" × 72" × 65") stands more than thirteen feet tall as it reveals its inner core and its outer dermis. It's as though we're examining the inside and outside of our own arteries or an organic bodily form that humans rely on for survival. The title suggests a pocket *inside* a wall or the inside of something—an inner area that contains something and that connects to a larger structure. (See figure 7.4.)

In 1985, eighteen years before von Rydingsvard began creating *Wall Pocket*, she told an interviewer about a favorite sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of "a woman shaped like a column particularly in front where veils cling to her body and then they unfurl in the back where forms are more torn apart."¹² This is *Venus Genet-*



Figure 7.4. Ursula von Rydingsvard, Insert, *Wall Pocket*, 2003–2004.

Image © David Allison. Used by permission of the artist.

rix, a Roman copy of an original now attributed to Kallimachus, a sculptor of Libyan Greek origin. Dore Ashton, in citing this quote for the opening of an essay on the artist, added:

There is a fundamental relationship between the perception of sculpture and the presence of the human body. No matter how far afield sculpture has gone since 600 B.C., it has never been able to quit itself of the existence of the first presence each human being knows—his own body as it obeys the laws of gravity, or defies them. . . . Like any sculptor in any epoch, von Rydingsvard has thought with her body and sensed her presence in the world. The world—that is to say, space—is the raw material in which the sculptor inscribes the human presence.¹³

Ashton's remarks and the artist's own words imply that von Rydingsvard's major inspiration for *Wall Pocket* is *Venus Genetrix*. When von Rydingsvard spoke about *Wall Pocket* at the Sculpture Center on March 4, 2011, she referred to the sculpture by saying "*SHE* (emphasis added) is vulnerably stacked" and "has a straight vertebra—a straight wide back." Curator Helaine Posner suggested that *Wall Pocket* reminded her of *Winged Victory*, also by Kallimachus, for the sides slightly "wing out." Yet it has closer ties to *Genetrix*, now transformed into a vulnerably stacked, straight-spined, working-class goddess.

Genetrix is a prototype of an idealized, empowered woman. It's an important ancestor for *Wall Pocket*, yet the artist does not dwell on this, freeing each viewer to have her or his own associations and interpretations. *Wall Pocket* is larger in size and scale, wood instead of marble. In addition to its voluptuous exterior, its inner folds and layers make this sculpture more introspective. Also, the initial cuts are penciled onto the wood, and its final skin is covered with graphite, so *drawing* becomes an added element in the sculpting process. Its many layers and types of allusions point both to reality and to art.

Wall Pocket shows that the artist's forms have relationships to drawing, sculpture, art history, nature, man-made processed objects, and human flesh. Its strange title, its individuality, and its inner and outer parts invite introspection. The work goes beyond Baudrillard's definition of *simulation* to become its own entity. As the work reveals its lines, cuts, gashes, marks, and tones associated with art, the processed cedar also ages naturally, changing its hue over time from flesh-rust-beige to silver-gray brown.

Von Rydingsvard's art is about inner and outer correspondences and also about the deep psychological inner workings of our lives. Each work permits us to discover its humor and joy yet also its irregularities, protuberances, and aberrations that may signal maladies and hardships. The art reminds us, as though it is talking to us, that our strengths often come from overcoming life's challenges. It takes us *into* a world we have never previously seen and shows us a world where bodies undergo synesthesia, a disorienting shift or "confusion of the senses" that makes a small vessel colossal or a lace collar wooden or a sensuous surface suddenly jagged and rough. *Wall Pocket* is a subject for those who take time to viscerally feel its depths.

These three international sculptors—Katrín Sigurdardóttir, César Cornejo, and Ursula von Rydingsvard—respectively of Icelandic, Peruvian, and Polish heritages—each merge subject with object in unexpected ways. Their work variously explores interrelations with cultural anthropology, drawing, sculpture, and architecture and also has unexpected psychological and physical aspects.¹⁴ Is this art of the future?

II. The Modernist/Social Practice Divide

The idea of the object merging with or transforming itself into the subject falls squarely between the current warring camps of modernism/postmodernism and social practice. In the modernist camp, it rethinks nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic theories by Hegel, Danto, Merleau-Ponty, and others of the object as “other” and reframes sculpture both in relation to viewers and to any field that becomes a part of an art endeavor or experience. Two early manifestations of what is now called modernism are *Las Meninas* (1656) by Velázquez and *The Third of May* (1808) by Goya. Both involve self-consciousness on the part of the artist—a self-consciousness that goes beyond the perceptions and interpretations of their day.

Velázquez captured himself painting the antics of the Spanish royals. The painting famously tells its story from multiple points of view. Pablo Baler suggests that in *Las Meninas* the uses of perspective become a parody as well as a paradox about simultaneous perceptions.¹⁵ The artist makes *his act of painting an integral part of the world he depicts*, even adding a royal crest to his own chest.

Goya, just as self-consciously, depicts uniformed French soldiers executing unarmed, white-shirted peasants. “The innovative composition—critical elements are placed outside the picture plane and the immediate action is forced to the foreground—amplifies the overall impact,” as the Metropolitan Museum’s James Voorhies has pointed out, also noting that Goya’s painting demonstrated his allegiance to Spain, in part to counter accusations that he was a traitor, for Goya painted for the Bonaparte regime before the Spanish regained control of their country. Goya later retired to France.¹⁶ Does the artist’s most famous painting depict his *true* national loyalties? Goya found new ways to compose war narratives, as he was, perhaps, *masking* his hatred of war. These works continue to enlighten us about the social and psychological issues and politics of their day. It’s important to note, too, that today, in 2013, it’s not an overstatement to say that self-consciousness by artists and unjust acts by individuals and governments are ubiquitous and do not often add up to art that seems significant.

In the late twentieth century, Arthur Danto’s books *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* and *After the End of Art*—based on Hegel’s nineteenth-century dialectical argument that art has progressive stages that will end—suggested that these stages, indeed, ended in the 1960s with Andy Warhol’s self-conscious iterations of Brillo boxes and Campbell soup cans. For some, making consumer items into art ushered in an era of pluralism in which art itself replaced discourses about it. These points have some merit, but the full picture is more complex.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, meanwhile, in his theories of the corporality of consciousness and intention, turned his attention to linguistics, art, psychology, and other fields. Today, his idea of a subject's *relation* to an object has additional possibilities. One area of investigation in social anthropology, psychology, and feminism is the treating of what was, in Merleau-Ponty's day, the object as "the other" in a dramatically different manner. This chapter will not retravel the historically valid trail of "object as other"—originally a strategy to show exclusion as a wedge to urge inclusion.

In yet another direction, the belief that art serves human social concerns is, at best, unrealistic, romantic, reductive, and in some hands, didactic. In addition, from an art insider's viewpoint, the world *is* a global village in which a handful of curators, museum directors, and art historians cull the field to a hierarchical (usually male) top tier.¹⁷ The arts of Jackson Pollock (peak years 1947–1952) and Andy Warhol (peaking 1962–1968) dominated the second half of the twentieth century, while Louise Bourgeois, in my opinion, produced work more nuanced, original, and compelling than Pollock and Warhol. Her art offers thousands of psychologically rich, hilariously funny ways of seeing dysfunctional families: a woman wearing a house on her body, curious towers with secret passages, mama spiders (who eat their young), and the insides of wombs. Viewers can climb Bourgeois's towers and walk under the legs of her giant spiders. Bourgeois's art turned objects into subjects as it pioneered the sociopsychological directions chosen later by Sigurdardóttir, Cornejo, and von Rydingsvard. These merits notwithstanding, the canon-makers anoint a select few based primarily on the politics in the art field at a given time.¹⁸

One final dilemma facing art viewers is inattention blindness. As Ellen K. Levy points out in "Designing the Art of Attention," inattention blindness may be the result of a distraction, cultural conditioning or bias, or other emotional issues on the part of the viewer.¹⁹ Levy's ongoing studies involving perceptual thresholds and conditions show that many variables come into play depending on the type of art, the type of viewer, and the type of interaction. Levy addresses the ways that Anthony Gormley's *Ghost* (2007), which positions viewers in a fog-filled space, and Matthew Briand's *Audio-Visual Exchange Helmets*, which forces its wearers to spy upon what another participant is seeing, increase the viewer's bodily understanding of his or her own reference frames. As Levy elaborates:

I suggest that some embodied artistic approaches to the attentional system and new findings in neuroscience could be viewed as mutually reinforcing. Some art experiments are pertinent to displacements of sensory phenomena in some scientific research. However, art makes them accessible and more memorable to a broader public than is typically the case in scientific experiments. Participants now interacting with artworks that employ immersive and interactive attributes may be encouraged to adjust to new perceptual circumstances by recalibrating their senses. Viewed in this way, the function of art becomes adaptive. To the extent that the participant is made aware of the recalibration, new modes of understanding the world may open up.²⁰

Art now includes new media, performance, and sensory/motor possibilities. It's important to observe how these variables affect each viewer's attention or blindness in relation to art.

An alternative direction that in some instances opposes or reverses modern/postmodern considerations is social practice. Most of the time, social practice is not art (as defined in the opening paragraph), and aesthetic criteria are downplayed or intentionally absent. As Claire Bishop has pointed out, *social practice*, which includes the Yes Men, Mel Chin, and others, involves political and social action with varying degrees of closeness (to audiences) and stages of participation—from one-on-one to mass art events. The Yes Men specialize in "Identity Correction" by impersonating corporate and government profiteers in order to publicly humiliate them. An example of their political activism is announcing, while dressed as Dow executives, that Dow Chemical is generously paying for the Bhopal disaster they caused. Is this art? One of Bishop's conclusions is that in these practices, evidence of aesthetic value and *genuine participation* [by audiences] were "problematic" and "the whole rise of social practice signals a lack of faith in art and in democratic political processes."¹ In general, Bishop suggests that the *origins* of social practice were subversive, used guerilla tactics, and attacked anything, including visual arts.² Ironically, Reifenthal's *Triumph of the Will*, which idealizes Hitler's rebuilding of Germany and the physical beauty and good works of the Hitler youth, can be seen as combining social practice and aesthetics. It's obvious, too, that Hitler's and Mao's regimes used their own versions of social practice to further their goals.

Social practice is presently taught at many universities, and as it is applied by artists with differing backgrounds, it may benefit its viewers or its target audience as well as exceed the "guidelines" that Bourriaud outlines in *Relational Aesthetics*, *The Raddicant*, and *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay, or How Art Reprograms the World*. Social practice may or may not act as a subject, may or may not provide psychoanalytical complexity.

Creative Time, a New York City-based organization, advocates social practices worldwide and hosts conferences that educate, promote, and network in this field. Nato Thompson, its chief curator, told audiences at Cooper Union on August 2, 2011, that artists should be socially engaged agents of change. He dismissed aesthetic considerations and all of Bourriaud's books (no reason given). Thompson praised Suzanne Lacy's book *Leaving Art: Writing on Performance, Politics, and Publics, 1974–2007* (2010), and he endorsed guerilla movements, citing social acts including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre of 1989, and the Zapatista EZLN movement begun in 1994, which challenged the rights of the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund "to dictate economies."³

Social practice takes many forms. Left-of-liberal projects are on the rise in progressive cities such as Los Angeles and New York and in more dangerous locales including Jerusalem and some other Middle Eastern cities. Susan Sontag risked staging Bertold Brecht's *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in 1993 during its four-year siege. Social practice is also visible in right-of-conservative politics such as the Tea Party, which

borrowed the metaphor of the Boston Tea Party—a protest against unfair taxation that helped start the American Revolution—and gives it a new, narrow meaning that does not benefit most Americans.

In some hands, including artists Katrín Sigurdardóttir and César Cornejo, social practice may also be art. Each exceeds Bourriaud's concept by using basic construction materials to create museum-quality work. Museums are changing too. *Museum* is defined here, optimistically, as "a dynamic space for cultural exchanges." Museums may show contemporary art and/or provide further contexts and historical examples of art and ideas from varied periods and cultures.

III. The Art Languages of the Future

As we have briefly seen, Bourriaud, among others, believes that modernism no longer serves the public interests, and some to the left of Bourriaud dismiss his *definitions* of social practice as not being radical enough. The most proactive solution is to treat modernism/postmodernism and social practice as history lessons and to choose a *new* "middle way": art that viscerally engages viewers in a two-way conversation—i.e., art that becomes a subject.

Sculptor John Crawford, who spent ten years making farm tools in Italy in order to master traditional blacksmithing and who now uses industrial forging processes to make his sculpture, put it this way:

I used to think the problem started with Warhol; then I moved back to Duchamp. Now I believe it started in the Renaissance when artists began to sign their work and see themselves as individuals. Before that, like in many tribal cultures today, making art was more of a service, much as a blacksmith provides tools. Art was a communally understood tool, helping all to know the unknowable—and that's a good reason to make art. It is transformative without the problems of Modernism, such as being too personal or too commercial.²⁴

Art that speaks for itself is not limited to artists who are sane, artists whose works serve higher interests than themselves, and artists with humanist agendas. The Alexander McQueen show at the Metropolitan Museum broke most art "rules" as it broke attendance records.²⁵ McQueen's visual *tour de force* literally merged beauty and death. The catalog cover hologram showed the artist's face transformed into his skull. The show's "fashions" were made of everything from specimen slides to feathers to clam shells. McQueen's Scottish tartan outfits, when shown originally, were splattered with blood to remind viewers of British wars against the Scots. For one show, models wore a crown of thorns and other death-like headgear. The now-famous shoes (worn regularly by Lady Gaga, among others) look like inflated houses on stilts. One model *without legs* wore wooden, nonbending prosthetic legs and a dress so rigid she could not turn her head to see where she was walking. With lights and music to match his art and to drive audiences half-crazy with repeated drones or

other well-chosen, nontraditional ear art, McQueen liberated fashion from reality as he imprisoned models' bodies in impossible-to-wear leather corsets, lace veils torn by deer antlers, and high collars that held the head in a vise. McQueen's suicide, like his fashions, was a self-conscious act. He zoomed light years ahead of the perceptions of others to produce art that merged high degrees of social consciousness and idiosyncrasy. McQueen often nudged his privileged viewers to think and move beyond their own skins. During the time period of each fashion show, the art became the subject as the models and the viewers became objects.

In every era including our own, art may exclude some or all of the senses. One favorite nonvisual art experience occurred in Paris in 2005 when I cautiously parted a soft heavy curtain and entered the vast pitch-black space below Miriam Goodman's Gallery.²⁶ The only thing there—(a recording of) the artist's insistent heartbeat and a tiny flash of light—set my own heart pounding. Christian Boltanski has created colossal installations, but this was their opposite. The unique, universal beating of one heart hit me like a thunderbolt. I was touched by a sound. It was not Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* nor the chorale of a sylvan river and its bird families; it was a recognizable thumping rhythm—an epiphany about what it means to be alive.

If art, in whatever form, becomes a subject to such a strong degree that it figuratively exchanges messages with its viewer, this, in turn, suggests that museum and other art collections house some work that no longer engages viewers or serves as a record of something interesting. Even now, some museums do not collect art and serve as staging areas for temporary exhibitions and performances, and some types of art take place expressly *outside* art institutions. It is important to rethink old classifications, including psychoanalytical, and to find new ways to apply language to the field so that we may gain new understandings of art and its history. *The Third of May*, in a future era (or even now) may be seen as an antiwar and an antireligious beacon rather than as a homage to Spain in the face of French injustice.

Art is changing, in part, in response to historic, economic, political, technological, and, for some, spiritual conditions, but how should we “read” its ego-driven, sexist, racist, and otherwise troubled past? From Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800), a heroic portrait of Napoleon on a rearing white horse, to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), thirty-nine place settings with creative ceramic portraits of mythic and historic women's vaginas, the cultural signifiers of each age have aged. This is another reason to turn modernism on its ear and to cast aside some old readings of the past. More often than necessary, art historians are “invested” in a movement or artist. Kirk Varnedoe once showed how differently Jackson Pollock's work was “seen” over the decades.²⁷ Few modernist art historians agreed with each other about *why* this artist was or remains important, but most agreed that Pollock ushered in a new era. Decisions made by consensus are different in kind than decisions made by a few canon-makers. Yet *both* of these decision-making models are flawed—as social practice theorists point out.

An equally slippery slope is embracing revolutionary acts unconnected to art, especially given the ongoing wars in the world today. Artists have a hard enough time

supporting themselves without dodging bullets, too. Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were lynched in 1964 for trying to register voters in Mississippi. Dying unjustly for a cause is one theme common to modernism (*The Third of May*) and social practice (Tiananmen Square). Vladimir Mayakovsky embraced revolution, making twelve revolutionary rules in his 1926 tome *How Verses Are Made*, starting with: "Poetry is a manufacture. A very difficult, very complex kind, but a manufacture" and "Innovation, innovation in materials and methods, is obligatory for every poetical composition."⁶ Renewing art by going through/into/back to craft traditions makes sense. Sadly, Mayakovsky committed suicide after his 1930 play *The Bath House* was a failure in Leningrad. Did his communist comrades miss or misunderstand his complexities and innovations? As we've seen, our three chosen artists, too, have manufactured innovative, complex work that may be hard for some to see, especially when one uses only language and a single black-and-white reproduction to discuss a three-dimensional work with particular hues, mass, textures, dimensions, and relations to viewers.

As the Internet floods the information air waves, images from Sung Dynasty bronzes to air-brushed sports cars to interactive cyber-creatures are increasingly seen by self-selecting audiences—and often reduced to images alone. Art writers and art historians must reframe ways to say what art offers, or a confusion or an absence of the languages of art and its histories will result. As John Crawford and Mayakovsky suggest, artists should master their media in order to explore the unknowable and to make the unmakeable.

In the first pages of this chapter, Sigurdardóttir, Cornejo, and von Rydingsvard⁷ show how variously an artist may utilize scale, anthropology, cultural signifiers, and materials in unique, complex ways to make art that speaks directly to viewers. Many artists—too many to name—are also turning objects into subjects that engage us in ways we could not have previously imagined. Not all subject art is significant—or on one's own political side. It's up to each of us to decide when to choose art that draws us into a productive conversation and *which* conversations point the way to the future.

Notes

1. Quoted in Jean-Louis Voilcau, "On *Utopie*, an Interview with Jean Baudrillard," in Jean Baudrillard, *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopie* (1967–1978), trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 21.

2. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 80.

3. The installations are full-scale interpretations of eighteenth-century rooms at the Metropolitan Museum, one from the Hôtel de Crillon (1777–1780), Place de la Concorde, Paris; the other from Hôtel de Cabris (ca. 1774), Grasse, Provence. The latter installation, as noted, also becomes progressively smaller in scale.

4. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 107.

5. Space does not permit a fuller analysis of Bourriaud's widely read critique of modernism, which begins in *Relational Aesthetics* by addressing how art in the 1990s no longer fit

into existing categories. The summary of *Postproduction* and *Radicant Art* is taken from Ruth McKinney Burket's 2011 analyses—part of her graduate studies at State University of New York, New Paltz. Social practice is discussed further in parts II and III of this chapter.

6. From a studio visit with the artist on May 27, 2011.

7. Kiesler's ideas were more advanced than the program he directed from 1937 to 1943 at the Laboratory for Design Correlation at Columbia University's Department of Architecture.

8. Cornejo has created an eighty-page report on the Puno Museum of Contemporary Art for Creative Capital. This report is online at Blurb and will be updated.

He has also published an additional catalog, *Primera Entrega*, in a limited edition of 1,000, published in Lima, Peru, in 2011. It includes an essay by Gabriela Salgado, "The Museum as an Exercise in Human Exchange," which discusses the Puno project in relation to Gerardo Mosquera's idea of a decentralized museum, the theories of Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel, and other correspondences. Cornejo, in addition, has exhibited in Tokyo, London, New York, Tampa, and Lima. For the December 2011 Miami Art Basel Fair, his work was chosen for a solo art positions booth representing the Lima, Peru, gallery Lucia de la Puente.

9. Peru's history of internal violence predates even the historic native/Spanish schism in 1553 when Francisco Pizarro strangled the last Inca ruler, who had killed his own brother. Lika Mural's "The Eye That Cries," the only national monument to mourn the estimated sixty thousand mostly rural people killed by the Shining Path guerrillas during the eighties and nineties, was built with private funding. "The Eye That Cries" brought consolation and symbolic reparations to the families of victims of violence. It was desecrated by followers of Peru's Fujimori government because it includes those killed by the army; its future is undecided as of this writing.

10. Von Rydingsvard's other awards include a 1984 Guggenheim Fellowship, 1979 and 1987 National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Grants, 1992 International Association of Art Critics Award for Best Small Museum Exhibition, and 2000 International Association of Art Critics second place prize for Best Show in a Commercial Gallery. Her work is in many museums and public and private collections.

11. From a summer 2010 *Artforum* review by Emily Hall.

12. Interview with Judy Collischan Van Wagner, June 7, 1985, cited in Dore Ashton's essay in *The Sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvard* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), 9. Venus Genetrix, 59½" high, Roman, imperial period, 1st–2nd century, marble copy of a Greek bronze statue attributed to Kallimachos.

13. Ashton, *The Sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvard*, 9.

14. Space does not permit elaborations on this point.

15. See Pablo Baler's essay *Los sentidos de la distorsión: fantasías epistemológicas del neobarroco latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2008), 31–33.

16. James Voorhies. "Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the Spanish Enlightenment." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goya/hd_goya.htm (October 2003).

17. Today, at age thirty, Ryan Trecartin is the newest talent poised to enter the canon. Roberta Smith and others have hailed Trecartin's art as unifying aesthetic, political, social, and philosophical directions in art. See Smith's "Like Living, Only More So," *New York Times*, June 23, 2011. *The New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" gushed, "To put it simply, Trecartin—aided by his close collaborator, Lizzie Fitch, and a revolving cast of often cross-dressing cunts, starting himself—is the most consequential artist to have emerged since the nineteen-eighties." This

ignores Pipilotti Rist, Jessica Stockholder, and other precursors of Treccartin's direction whose work has significance beyond Treccartin's current level of practice.

18. Bourgeois, of course, has received some top honors, including the US National Medal of Arts (1997) and the National Order of the Legion of Honour (from France, 2008).

19. Ellen K. Levy, "Designing the Art of Attention," *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 8, no. 1 (2010): 93–99.

20. Ellen K. Levy, memo to Jan Castro, "Notes on the merging of subject and object," part of Levy's 2011 PhD on the science of perception for Plymouth University, United Kingdom.

21. Claire Bishop, "Living as Form," talk sponsored by Creative Time at Cooper Union, May 18, 2011. Since Bishop's remarks were based on her conclusions for a forthcoming book, and since her remarks were cut short by the moderator, this quote (and our space limits) cannot fully represent Bishop's views. Bishop is assistant professor at The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

22. Bishop's full lecture is online at www.CreativeTime.org/. See also Bishop's essay "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* (February 2006).

23. Paraphrase of Nato Thompson talk on August 2, 2011. Thompson talked about specific protest movements from Cabaret Voltaire to the present and about "trying to make sense of a coercive, dominating political system." He argued that "how people affect each other to effect social change" . . . "is not germane to the arts."

24. Personal conversation with John Crawford on August 16, 2011.

25. "Alexander McQueen Retrospective among Top 10 Most Visited Exhibitions in Museum's History." New York: Met Museum press release, August 8, 2011. The exhibition *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* attracted 661,509 visitors from May 4 to August 7, making it the eighth most popular exhibition ever held at the Met in its 141-year history.

26. The Paris exhibition, titled *Prendre la Parole*, was from September 3 to October 15, 2005.

27. Varnedoe talk around 1990 at Washington University's Steinberg Auditorium, St. Louis (date unknown).

28. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How Verses Are Made*, trans. G. M. Hyde (London: Cape, 1970), 56.

29. Websites of artists discussed: <http://www.cesarcornejo.com>, <http://www.katrinisigurdar-dottir.info/>, <http://www.ursulavonrydingsvard.net/>.

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