

Things Fall Apart

GRAHAM LARKIN ON "THE OBJECT IN TRANSITION"

At this point I feel a little guilty when people want to buy [my latex works]. I think they know but I want to write them a letter and say it's not going to last. I am not sure what my stand on lasting really is. Part of me feels that it's superfluous and if I need to use rubber that is more important. Life doesn't last; art doesn't last.

—Eva Hesse, 1970

"THE OBJECT IN TRANSITION: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art" took place over two days this past January at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. It brought together art experts in various disciplines working on sculpture, painting, and mixed-media artworks, with attention paid to such diverse topics as "the importance of an artwork's surface, dealing with process, the artist's voice and intent, the life and death of objects, and methods of improved collaboration." While the panel presentations provided a healthy mix of conservators, curators, and academics, the audience was weighted toward conservation experts. And one can certainly detect a conservation bias in the conference brochure's contention that "the interpretative problems that have arisen in relation to durability and ephemerality in modern and contemporary art have been exacerbated by an art historical methodology that has tended to privilege theoretical interpretation and not concrete object study. Thus, the descriptive knowledge that arises from object-based study and the study of artistic techniques is something that has increasingly left the field of art history and become primarily the domain of conservators."

In positing such a strong opposition between theoretical and material engagements, this statement is misleading. Theoretically adventuresome art historians are quite as well equipped as old-school formalists to engage with objects, describe art, and study technique. A related misconception—and one vigorously disputed by Yve-Alain Bois on day two of the conference—is the idea that academic art historians base their research on photographs, as opposed to direct encounters with art objects. Anyone who has worked with curators or conservators will be familiar with the caricature of the slothful, ignorant, aesthetically indifferent academic.



Paul McCarthy, *Bossy Burger*, 1991, milk, flour, ketchup, mayonnaise, turkey bones, bowls, cooking utensils, dolls, chef costume, mask, and set from television show *Family Affair*. Performance view, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Vaughan Rachel.

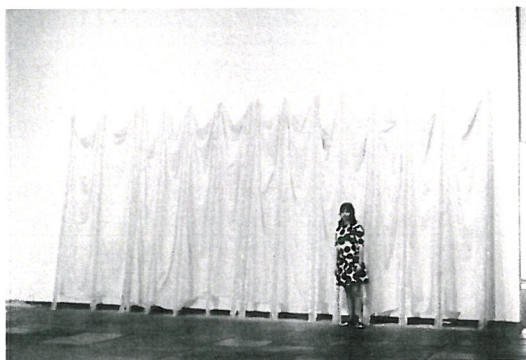
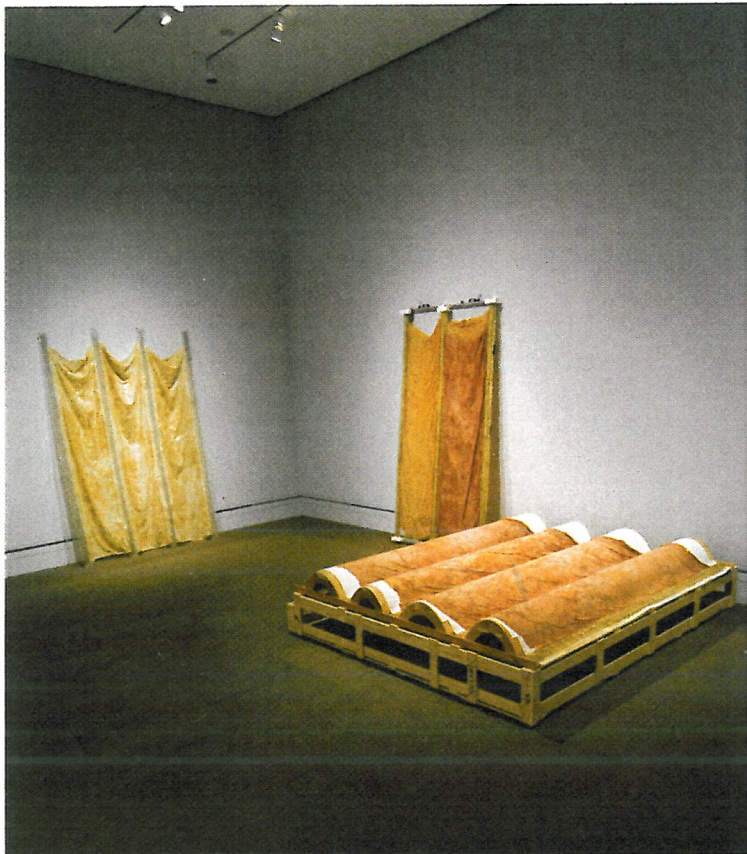
Questions about where art begins and ends are no longer academic. Good luck trying to acquire or present vintage performance art, Conceptual art, or appropriation art while maintaining a clear distinction between art and context or art and life.

Meanwhile, in the ivory tower, professors and graduate students flatter themselves with the myth of the methodologically challenged museum drone. All such charges are little more than symptoms of what Freud calls the narcissism of small differences, namely the tendency for any two parties engaged in the same enterprise—in this case the business of thinking about art—to overvalue every trifling distinction that could make one's own side look better.

The Getty conference was an important step in overcoming this mutual *ressentiment*. In such a climate, there is great political value in the mere act of people from these disparate domains collaborating in public. Clearly sensing this need for solidarity, the organizers invited interdisciplinary teams of art experts, including some artists, to treat such diverse matters as the status of unfinished works (centering on the case of Piet Mondrian), the place of exploratory and rejected

works (Barnett Newman), the issue of refinishing by conservators and by artists (Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, David Novros), and the challenges of documenting time-based media (Bruce Nauman) and of registering subtle differences in surface and light (Newman, James Turrell). These presentations, which took various forms, were complemented by loosely themed panel discussions at the end of each half day, in which the presenters were encouraged to place their respective projects in a wider context. (Video recordings of the entire proceedings can be viewed on the Getty's website.)

On the night before the conference proper, there was a public roundtable featuring artists Rachel Harrison, Paul McCarthy, and Doris Salcedo, speaking with curator Elisabeth Sussman and conservator Christian Scheidemann about their production processes and related issues of preservation. McCarthy



From top: Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969. Installation view, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008. From left: Exhibition copy of a section of the work, 2007; original left section; and original central section in storage crate. Eva Hesse in front of her sculpture *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, in the exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1969. Photo: Frances Mulhall Achilles Library.

proved the most provocative of the panelists, recounting—with Sadean thoroughness and detachment—the pigheadedly involuted stages in the development of his productions, in particular *Bossy Burger*, 1991. Every time this work is reinstalled, the artist dons a chef's hat and an Alfred E. Neuman mask and bespatters a room made of pieces of a disused Hollywood sitcom set with ketchup, mayonnaise, milk, and turkey

bones, in precise imitation of an ur-performance shown on a monitor that continues to be part of the work once installed. The mess from the preceding installation is never cleaned up, leaving the countertops, furniture, and walls encrusted with the residue of each prior rendition. As a further complication, the partially used containers from past productions accrete in tidy, mold-encrusted rows—especially disgusting when one considers that the work has been installed about a dozen times since 1991.

In the ensuing panel discussion McCarthy confirmed that *Bossy Burger* could eventually be perpetuated by anyone capable of assembling the set and following the complex choreography.

This conceit of self as prosthetic—the artist as interchangeable machine part—beautifully accords with McCarthy's famous obsession with mechanized rubber mannequins, which hump trees or barrels until they fall apart, only to be subsequently reused in static works. The next logical step would be for McCarthy to have himself pickled and put on permanent display, in the manner of Lenin or Jeremy Bentham—though in his case it would probably have to be a botched job. As intrigued as he is by the idea of *Bossy Burger* being perpetuated by future generations, McCarthy made it clear that he is also “completely OK with pieces that have different life spans”—anywhere from fifteen seconds to thousands of years. And he regrets the fact that “the market is driving this whole concern for art to continue to exist for infinity, and it completely limits what art can be and what materials you can use.”

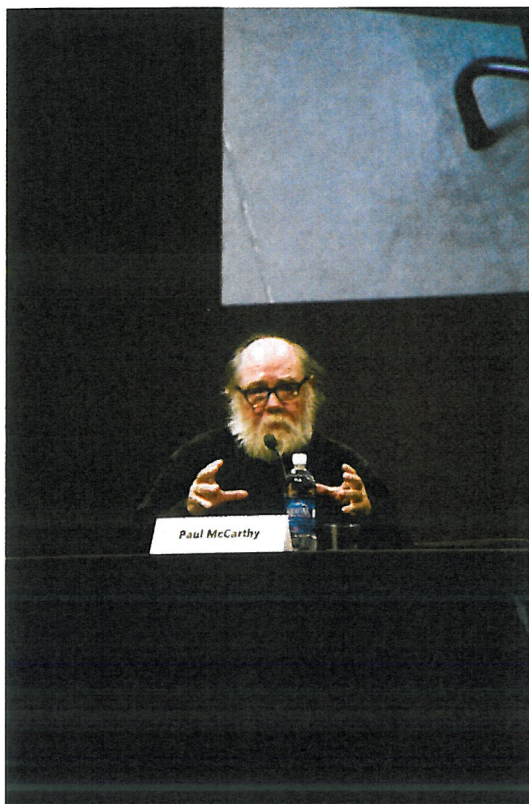
Although McCarthy stole the first night, in the ensuing conference Eva Hesse's decaying sculpture *Expanded Expansion*, 1969, emerged as the main crucible for concern over artistic intention, conservation ethics, and market influence. Portions of the work—which is made of sheets of rubberized cheesecloth supported by fiberglass poles—had even been shipped in for the occasion. These were displayed alongside a new exhibition copy of a section of the

piece (authorized by the estate and gingerly referred to as a “material mock-up”), which gave visitors a vivid sense of how the work itself might have looked when new in 1969.¹ Whereas the original *Expanded Expansion* had darkened, hardened, and disintegrated, the “mock-up” was luminously bright, and ethereal enough to shudder at the breeze from a passing body. To heighten the drama, a panel discussion focusing on the work included a fascinating Getty-sponsored film documenting the making of the “mock-up” under the direction of Hesse's fabricator Doug Johns. (Johns was in the audience, as was Helen Charash, Hesse's sister and sole heir.)

While there can be no question, given the history and condition of the work, that *Expanded Expansion* was central to the issues on the table that weekend, the conference participants may have reached for the Hesse worry beads a little too often. In chairing the final session, Jeffrey Weiss (then still director of the Dia Art Foundation) registered his own Hesse fatigue by inviting the panelists to move beyond “quasi-biographical” interpretations of her art. “I have never been to an event relating to Eva Hesse,” he confided, “when this didn't start to happen: that people spoke of the sadness of it, on the one hand, and of the poetry of the sadness of it, on the other.” Is it really necessary, he asked, to keep linking the deterioration of her sculptures to her untimely death? Nobody took up his challenge.

In the same session, Weiss pointed out that although case studies were critical to the collective preservation project, it would surely be good to start formulating some “larger precepts and principles.” He invited thoughts toward a philosophy, an ethics, or a poetics of interdisciplinary analysis and preservation. Tellingly, the only direct reply to these musings was a negative one: Bois questioned the very possibility of formulating overarching precepts and principles, claiming that “every work of art requires . . . a different, ad hoc solution.” Of course, Bois's rock-kicking response could itself be taken as a sign of a pragmatic and materialist philosophy of interpretation and perhaps even be worked into a guiding principle—which is not to say that such a gloss would get us anywhere.

Alternatively, one could forgo such principled myopia and attend to broader issues looming on the margins of the conference. At one point, an audience member asked what role the “market value of works



Paul McCarthy speaking at "The Object in Transition," Getty Center, Los Angeles, January 24, 2008.

such as Eva Hesse's play in keeping these works alive." In response, Jill Sterrett, director of collections and conservation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, elicited spontaneous applause with her observation that the influence of the market was "the elephant in the room"—one that institutions like to "keep out of the discussion." (Did anyone recall that McCarthy had ferociously attacked that very elephant?) From the audience, art historian Nancy J. Troy went so far as to implore future conference organizers to place "more front and center" certain "structuring aspects of our culture . . . the politics, the power structures . . . copyright, the legal." For her, a focus on such neglected issues "would be fascinating as parts of what we're all trying to envision as the next step."

I'm not convinced that such an expanded discussion is indeed the best way forward. No amount of fretting or informed debate will ever enable a community of art experts to materially affect economic and political power structures. We would be lucky just to alleviate restrictive copyright regulations—and I would sooner leave that fight up to people with the patience to squabble with lawyers. Since markets and laws are inescapable facts of culture, we of course need to recognize their existence, as surely as we need to obey the law of gravity. But that doesn't mean it would

be especially helpful for us to put either of them at the center of our next discussion.

From my curatorial perspective, a more productive next step—and one much closer to Weiss's unheeded call to principles—would be an extensive answer to the New York Museum of Modern Art conservator Jim Coddington's exhortation that we ask ourselves what we are saving, and who we are saving it for. Coddington's "we" might ideally designate a community of conservators, curators, academics, and artists (all present and accounted for at the Getty conference), as well as art librarians and archivists (neither present nor accounted for). I would hope to see these various producers, custodians, and interpreters of art committed to the examination, preservation, and exposition of art and evidence pertaining to the production and reception of art for the benefit of fellow researchers and a wider public.² My intention in lumping together art and evidence about art in this way is, on the one hand, to emphasize the potential pertinence of any evidence to every aspect of interpretation, preservation, and exposition and, on the other, to urge every member of this hoped-for community to face the fact that we cannot (and should not) always make a hard-and-fast distinction between the work itself and things commonly regarded as context or supporting evidence.

Such questioning of the ontological status of the artwork is nothing new. It has been going strong for at least a generation among theorists ("context is just more text") and for about a century among producers of art or anti-art. Indeed, given the abundance of Duchampian and Dadaist modes of artistic production in the past half century, the material traces of much ontologically challenging art have been piling up in museums, with the result that philosophical questions about where art begins and ends are no longer merely academic. Good luck trying to acquire, store, or present vintage performance art, environmental art, Conceptual art, or appropriation art while maintaining a clear distinction between art and context, art and life, art and artifact, art and interpretation, high and low, original and copy, or completion and incompleteness.

To put it differently, try approaching *Bossy Burger* while clinging to your copy of the American Institute of Conservation's *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice* ("Cultural property . . . is an invaluable and irreplaceable legacy that must be preserved for future generations"). It could get messy. The problem is not

with the code itself, but rather with the quaint tendency of us curators and conservators to think "art objects" when we read "cultural property." As indicated by the title and the topics in the Getty conference, museum knowledge workers are a materialistic bunch, instinctively clinging to the tangible object as if the art were somehow all in there.

When will we come to realize that the biggest challenge facing art museums today is the transition of art away from the object? In the end, I couldn't help feeling that the Getty conversations kept boomeranging back to Hesse because, for all the difficulties of *Expanded Expansion*, its gracious and romantic decay is such a comfortable armchair when compared with McCarthy's cogently deranged and eminently unpreservable art-as-biohazard. The biggest elephant in the room may have been wandering in the gap between our winsome heroine and the dude in the Alfred E. Neuman mask.

In our capacity as preservers of cultural property, we are generally ill equipped to deal with the challenges of McCarthy's art. If, however, museum workers were to start aligning ourselves more consciously with archivists and academics, really committing to the acquisition, interpretation, and display of art and evidence about art; if we were to work more collaboratively and purposefully in assembling not just art but also detailed conservation, fabrication, and installation specs; if we were to stop privileging the supposed *Ding an sich* over the idea and the document; if we were to give more credit to facsimiles, including authorized exhibition copies; if we were to become half as concerned with explicating artistic process as we are with showing material products; if we were to escalate the use of new technologies in sharing our expertise with one another and with a wider public—if, in short, we were to develop better knowledge networks within and among institutions and begin to reconceptualize the art museum as something more akin to a classroom, a laboratory, a history museum, an archive, or a theater—only then could we come up with a workable system of collecting and displaying concepts, installations, performances, and the *informe*. In the case of *Bossy Burger*, this may ultimately allow us to preserve the art while throwing the material effluvia in the trash, where they belong. □

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NOTES

1. The room also included two 1966 paintings by David Novros (one of them remade by the artist in 2006), a discarded Barnett Newman canvas, and a wooden maquette for Roy Lichtenstein's *Three Brushstrokes*, 1984, a recently repainted aluminum sculpture outside the entrance to the Getty Research Institute.
2. These terms are by no means self-evident. An *exposition* of art and evidence about art could take the form of a conversation, an exhibition, or a lecture. Or it could mean publication in any form: article, book, catalogue entry, wall label, website. The *evidence*—sometimes inhering in the object, sometimes extraneous to it—could likewise appear in any number of guises. For instance, it would include (1) *descriptions* of the genesis, life, and death of artworks (conception, execution, exhibition, display, acquisition, interpretation, alteration, decay, destruction, conservation) as recounted by various commentators (artists, their friends, their relatives, their fabricators, curators, conservators, dealers, collectors, critics) in various forms (letters, diaries, account books, published writings, sound and video recordings); (2) *material traces* of this same arc of existence, as evidenced in the works themselves and in extraneous materials including working equipment, supplies, test pieces, and rejected works; and (3) *reproductions or restagings* of works (by way of photography, video recording, facsimile, performance), in addition to accounts of such reproduction and refabrication. These three categories of evidence are by no means mutually exclusive. For instance, a photograph of a work may reasonably be viewed as a form of description or interpretation, and even as a material trace—thus placing it in two or three categories at once.

CROW/HISTORICAL RETURNS continued from page 291

NOTES

1. John Tagliabue, "For the Yachting Class, the Latest Amenity Can Take Flight," *New York Times* (October 2, 2007).
2. Marcelle S. Fischler, "Art That Follows the Money," *New York Times* (September 30, 2007).
3. David Joselit, "Richard Serra," *Artforum* (October 2007), 363.
4. Here I draw on the research of Hiroko Ikegami and Titia Hulst. See, e.g., Ikegami, "1964: Robert Rauschenberg and the Beginnings of Globalization in Modern Art" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2007), and Hulst's recent article "The Leo Castelli Gallery," *Archives of American Art Journal* 46, nos. 3–4 (Fall 2007), 16–22.
5. See Jennifer Wells, "Pop Goes the Market," in *Definitive Statements: American Art 1964–1966*, exh. cat. (Providence, RI: Department of Art, Brown University, 1986), 57.
6. An eloquent recent account in these terms of a similar phenomenon in the wake of the market collapse of the early 1990s can be found in Jerry Saltz, "Has Money Ruined Art?," *New York Magazine* (October 15, 2007), 39.
7. Eli Broad, interviewed by Willow Bay, Huffington Post (February 8, 2008).
8. Martin Filler, "Broad-Minded Museum," *New York Review of Books* (March 20, 2008), 16.
9. Adrian Ellis, "The Problem with Privately Funded Museums," *Art Newspaper* (February 2008), 24.
10. Lee Rosenbaum, "The Maier Monday Massacre: Ex-Director Describes What Happened," *ArtsJournal* (October 4, 2007).
11. Quoted in Darrell Laurant, "Right Now, Randolph Is Not a Peaceable Kingdom," Blog of the Seven Hills: Thoughts from the Columnist Darrell Laurant of the *News & Advance* in Lynchburg, VA (October 2, 2007).
12. Lee Rosenbaum, "A Betrayal of Trust: At the New York Public Library, It's Sell Now, Raise Money Later," *Wall Street Journal* (November 1, 2005).
13. See Carol Vogel, "Library's Art Auction Fails to Meet Expectations," *New York Times* (December 1, 2005).

SCANLAN/MODEST PROPOSALS continued from page 318

NOTES

1. Moira Roth, "An Interview with Robert Smithson (1973)," in *Robert Smithson*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 85.
2. Joseph Schumpeter, "Chapter VII: The Process of Creative Destruction," in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1942), 81–86.
3. Schumpeter, 83.

1923. Reprinted in *What Veblen Taught: Selections from the Writings of Thorstein Veblen* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 394–422. In this modest book, Veblen focuses on the peculiar exceptions to typically capitalist market competition that exist in the isolated conditions of a country town, the most prevalent being that monopolistic practices are tolerated by all members of the community because each of them provides a good or service that no one else does. Lack of competition causes prices to be higher, but it also forces a broader range of essential products to be made available. For example, if the town is not large enough to support two bakers, then an aspiring businessperson might decide to open a yoga studio instead.

5. Lucy Lippard, "The Structures, the Structures and the Wall Drawings, the Structures and the Wall Drawings and the Books," in *Sol LeWitt*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 27.

MEHRING/EMERGING MARKET continued from page 328

The art fair continued, of course, although the excitement of the first years gave way to business as usual by the early '70s. Moreover, the KUNSTMARKT's blatant exhibition of the art market was paralleled by and replicated in broad sectors of German society. Art mingled with everyday retail and attracted ordinary shoppers from the streets: Department-store chains such as Kaufhof, with the help of some dealers, showed and sold contemporary prints amid other merchandise; and an alliance of some forty stores in downtown Cologne displayed in their shopping windows art by Beuys, Warhol, and others. Owing to an awakened public interest in collecting, combined with the economic recession between 1966 and 1967, art was increasingly considered a form of investment immune to inflation. A milestone in this development was the *Kunstkompass* (Art Compass), started in October 1970 by Willi Bongard, a former *Die Zeit* journalist who during the '60s had spent two years in the US researching the relationship between art and commerce. The yearly survey ranked artists according to reputation and was based on a point system that calculated representation in important museum collections, international exhibitions, and art literature. Everyone who was anyone, from curators such as Harald Szeemann to dealers such as Alfred Schmela, diligently returned Bongard's questionnaires. The ranking was juxtaposed with current average prices, allowing readers to determine which artists, for example, were still relatively cheap in relation to their reputations. Published in the economics journal *Das Capital* and also circulated as an independent newsletter available for subscription titled *Art Aktuell*, Bongard's *Kunstkompass*, as one writer claimed facetiously, had the potential to become the "most discussed contribution to art criticism of the year." Bongard's project was only one example of the booming coverage of the art market gone public. National newspapers featured weekly art-market columns, and magazines such as *Der Spiegel* ran special issues on "Art as Investment."

During its most vibrant years, between 1967 and 1972, the KUNSTMARKT was largely responsible for generating the most public and open discussion about the contemporary art market in history. As the Munich critic Georg Jappe put it at the end of that period, there is "no country where there has been so much debate

speaking Switzerland." Moreover, in its attempt to reconnect West Germany with an international art world KUNSTMARKT not only succeeded (with repercuss felt to this day, as art aficionados regularly trek to B and elsewhere in the country) but became the indispensible model for all those contemporary art fairs that usually sprang up around the Western world—not just Basel but also FIAC in Paris in 1974, Art Chicago in 1975, the Armory Show in New York in 1998, and Frieze London in 2003. Paradoxically, though, what our protagonists founded to bring people into the gallery arguably beginning to keep them away. "That is the role of the inventors of the art fair," Zwirner comments, "a seeming mixture of pride and responsibility when about the diminishing importance of gallery showings within a current global market fueled by fairs. "We have no idea what havoc we would wreak. . . . Back in the days we used to hold back pictures for the openings. Now they are being held back for the fairs." □

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with artists who have deliberately retreated but also with the anonymous thousands who do not get shown, who either stop making art or continue their work in involuntary privacy. (Even her eventual move to live with her family in Texas recalls the retreat of a very different artist, Jeff Koons, who licked his wounds at Florida home of his parents in the early '80s.) While Lozano did seem extreme, even crazy, and there were those who properly avant-garde. But her work resonates because it dramatizes feelings that most artists, and in fact most people, have—even those to whom the world says rather than the reverse.

Lozano's rediscovery by the art world, as much as her withdrawal from it, belongs to a larger market dynamic. In the recent past, museums, galleries, critics, and auction houses have been reviving older and dead artists in earnest. Categories include the "artist's artist" (opposed to the collector's artist, I suppose) who has been seen as minor but begins to look major (Marcel Heilmann); the artist who enjoyed initial success but floundered when money got tight or when fashion changed (Alan Shields); the artist whose production was inconsistent or ephemeral (Tony Conrad). Not by coincidence, these rediscovered artists represent good value. Now construed as the product of integrity rather than the failure, their obscurity serves as a substitute for the obsolete category of the avant-garde; they even rival emerging artists as a source of speculative reward. As Nicolson pointed out in a recent conversation, unlike the freeminted art school graduate, the rediscovered artist comes complete with oeuvre and provenance.

Why does autonomy look so appealing right now? In part, it offers a kind of digestif for the current bloated market, a reassertion of the artist's agency amid continuing and inequitable redistribution of income.