

Culture rather than Art

By Brandon Joyce

Delivered as a keynote speech for the Temporary Academic Breakout Session, August 7th, 2008, at the Philadelphia Institute for Advanced Study

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We have been asked to read over the essay, *Each One Teach One*, by Florian Waldvogel, and pen a little response about its relationship to our fair Institute here. I'd like to begin with the tiniest, nitpicking detail; the little supertitle over the essay that says "*Notes for an Art School*."

Friends and news organs alike often characterize the Institute as an “art space” or an “art collective,” perhaps tacking on an addendum or two about our German classes or video brochure. However, I’m always fairly insistent on using other self-descriptions—christening the institute as a center-of-learning, a think-tank— or more significantly a *cultural* center or *cultural* collective, conspicuously trading in the a-word *art* for the c-word *culture*, and thereby revealing at least one little strand of my private agenda: namely, effecting a popular Gestalt shift from artspeak and artthink to culturespeak and culturethink.

One reason for this translation—to make a little confession here—is that I consider myself anti-art; but anti-art in the old-fashioned sense; the sense first thrown into play in the early 20th century, by figures like Tristan Tzara and Richard Huelsenbeck. This is to say, I think that art, as a conceptual apparatus and cultural category—the Kantian sphere or Fach, the idea of art—has outlived its usefulness as an essence, an honorific, an intellectual catchall, and maybe even as an institution. But, important to note: this does not mean that I am against the particular activities usually grouped under its umbrella—like painting, music, performance, sculpture, or film. I’m just against the umbrella itself; a tireless advocate of the infamous End of Art, the Death of Art, or even what has been called the Self-Transcendence of Art.

I think that the idea of Culture can do everything that the idea of Art can do; only better—especially when it comes to the transdisciplinary ethos that Waldvogel envisions for his Manifesta 6 School, an ethos which has accompanied most great cultural explosions in the West, from the Renaissance and Enlightenment to the great aesthetico-philosophical revolts of the early twentieth-century.

Culture subsumes not only all the "high culture" that can be found within the walls of the university— the visual arts, music, philosophy, literature, science, languages, history— it also rings nicely with something larger; culture in the sense used by Clifford Geertz and Clyde Klockhohn. Culture as "The total way of life of a people." Or, culture as "The precipitate of history." It is the anthropological sense of the word, as in Javanese culture, that stretches beyond the confines of the university— to include skateboarding, Pixar films, dogparks, energy drinks, lockpicking, grocery stores, immediate Experience, all distinct forms of life, and pretty much anything else caught in our "webs of significance." Both the disciplines and the undisciplined. As Waldvogel himself says "the concept of culture cannot be enshrined in any one definition, but is rather reflected in the differences between various cultural processes and practices within specific economic, social, and political contexts."

One of the problems with the idea of art is that, even if you have a really tricky Wittgensteinian anti-essentialist take on artspeak and artthink, or a suitably Hegelian appreciation for the dynamism of such concepts— steeped as they are in time and circumstance— you are still forced to carry the weight of the paradigms of painting and sculpture. And even when we speak of an art that has sloughed off the yoke of such paradigms, we are still speaking about an art-historical context that has painting and sculpture as its root, its trunk, and its center of gravity. Culture, the idea and term, does not suffer from the same inertia; having no reigning, emblematic activity as a golden measure. Any one practice within culture can be compared and contrasted with any another without seeking a holy orientation. This makes it all the easier to, in Waldvogel's words, "investigate the permanently shifting relationships of representation, discourse, and power from a number of perspectives."

The release from an obligatory art-historical context is especially helpful to wayward, miscellaneous, or previously unrecognizable practices and aesthetes — who find themselves weighed against Manet and Cezanne, whether or not this first-comparison fits. A phenomenon like "conceptual art," a funny race that includes luminaries like Chris Burden, Vita Acconci, Hans Haacke, Lawrence Weiner, I think sometimes loses with the adoption of the a-word. Many of their works could have been considered extensions of linguistics, psychology, philosophy, poetry, politics, or in some cases sport; rather than as footnotes to the history of painting and sculpture. Simply because Thought enters into the "manifold of the five senses," does not necessarily mean we should frame it within the same heritage as Titian, Goya, and Cubism. Speaking frankly, I'd like to see more "material culture," more word-made-flesh, coming from the historians and scientists and philosophers— exquisitely-rendered psychological experiments or original philosophy that exploits the form of the open gallery.

But back to my original point: I think the wide-definition or universalization of "art" is still not wide enough for radically anomic activities.

This goes double for revolts like Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, and Situationism and their characterization as "art movements," when they were as much social, philosophical, moral, political— in a word, cultural— upheavals. Again, were they really artists, or

something broader and richer like “culture-critics,” “culture-makers,” “idea-makers” (does anyone have a better term?), each cobbling out their own personal contribution to our “total way of life.” If we suppose, like George Kubler, “that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world,”— if we stretch our sense of art-history to mean both all “material culture” and via books all “mental culture,” what nostalgia forces us to cling to this idea of an art-history? Why does “mental culture” and “material culture” simply not add up to culture?

The so-called Death, or End, or Self-Transcendence of Art is not some ineluctable cultural fact, though, as when Hegel says that art “is and remains for us a thing of the past.” From me, it comes more as a suggestion, or a prescription, for helping people like Waldvogel and ourselves in our quest for horizon-widening and self-articulation. The conceptual trade-off might not be for everyone— paradigmatic painters and sculptures, for instance, or those who have never felt the brunt of the terminology, but for those that have, I want to help create a new space and jargon in which they can at last feel comfortable.

Now, I also understand that there is still some need for a quick handle for visual depictions, spectator-worthy forms of mimesis, pure craft, and the aesthetic play of form. Painting and drawing and collage and a host of other messier activities. I’m not interested in banning a word from the English language, or in simple semantic swapping. What I’m talking about is a deeply-embedded philosophical idea; and about moving beyond both its popular conceptions and beyond the self-analysis and problematics that propelled it through most of the twentieth century. Its popular conceptions are, I think, narrow and bothersome; and its problematics, exhausted. Leaving us in what Danto has characterized as the post-history of art.

Institutions— art institutions— like galleries, museums, academies, and other things of a weirder typology— have of course done us much good, but I think that they could accomplish even more if their self-image was something more like a seat or center of Bildung-making, a nexus of culture, rather than just a gallery-plus or an art museum with a wing for criticism. We need more of this form, this kind of structure— a recognizable social cluster dedicated to wide-culture; to Bildung. What would the best name or neologism?

Thus far, the university is the best working-model we have for such fervent creation and transmission of culture; dedicated, as Henrik Steffens says, to the “organised unity of knowledge.” The best living example of this *universitas* that we might call “wide culture.” And both Waldvogel and we here at the Philadelphia Institute for Advanced Study understand the virtues and necessity of this revered form. However, in modern universities— and probably even medieval universities like Paris and Bologna— as large, sprawling, millionairean operations, culture begins to suffer from the very “economic, social, and political contexts” it’s supposed to be shaping and critiquing. Even sillier tensions like interdepartmental squabbling and “fundwrestling” can place the autonomy of wide-culture into jeopardy. Likewise, when socio-politico-economic factors attempt to

turn universities into, as Waldvogel says, "the locus of mere vocational qualification," culture loses its essential fullness; some disciplines become handmaiden to others.

Here, I think, *universitas* could wisely take a page from the playbook of art-history; not so much from museums and art-academies, but from the loose, ragtag, caravan operations that have historically carried music and visual art from town to town. The fly-by-night galleries and modes of dissemination. The weirder typology I spoke of earlier. The university broken down into smaller nodes of culture-production and knowledge-production, outside of the claims of vocation, legitimacy, and authority. With this, we have a better chance for the flourishing of what I call "strong culture"— culture that can shape and change the very social, moral, philosophical, political, and economic circumstances it finds itself situated in. Rather than being merely a reflection, or in the Marxian sense, "superstructural." Creating new, mindful, and bright-eyed practices rather than the blind ones Adorno believes deserving of critical scrutiny. Waldvogel is wise to ask whether his School needs "a physical building, a venue," or a "campus." Many of us at the Institute have asked ourselves the very same question, about having a locus for cultural-production— whether it might be easier to work as cells, out of living rooms and closed restaurants, in shifting locales and websites. But we thought that, before entering this phase-change, or "self-transcending into pure Idea," it might be nice to see the new working-model in brick-and-mortar first, just to have something solid and photogenic to put on the postcards. An object for seeing and believing.

So to clarify briefly: I'm urging would-be gallerists and artists to maybe think and plan a bit broader, and simultaneously, for would-be culture-makers to meet them half-way. My principal peeve with Waldvogel in *Each One Teach One* is that for all his ambitions for Manifest 6, with such hopes for unitary knowledge and Promethean cultural renewal, I feel disappointed that he brings his missive to a close by recommending the cultivation the "core artistic skill of researching, working, and thinking in transdisciplinary terms." I feel he's is doing himself a disservice, when he could begin with transdisciplinarity as an axiom rather than a conclusion. Some of us here, at the Institute, are seeking a rounder, Goethean, sense of Bildung, culture, or "growth-for-growth's-sake"— with the hopes that we can more significantly effect and rewrite our "total way of life."

Thank You.