

Authenticity Crisis

*Deskilling, Amateurism, Pluralism and
Reality Television*

or

**How I Came to Make Art at
the Armory Show**

Deskilling: to reduce the level of skill needed for (a job)

Amateurism: one engaging in a pursuit but lacking professional skill

Authenticity: worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact

Deskilling and the **Industrial Revolution**

Industrialization brings about an assault on skill from both the industrial right and the socialist left





Industrial Right and Devaluation of Skill

Domestic Life

- The industrial revolution meant the separation of the home and the workplace, and the decline of agriculture as a normal part of life
- In the twentieth century shopping has largely become deskilled: trading standards and commodification of products has standardized the quality of goods, supermarkets have reduced the need to be able to find one's own butcher, grocer etc,

Workplace

- Associated with the development of the assembly line, standardized production techniques, and automation.
- This technique replaces skilled craft workers with unskilled, cheaper labour, and some theorists have suggested that this will cause wages to fall and insecure employment to increase.

An engraving of two women in traditional dress. One woman stands on the left, holding a large wooden pestle over a large, dark, rounded object on the ground. The other woman sits on the right, working with a smaller object. The scene is set outdoors with a simple background.





PAINT BY NUMBERS, WINTER SCENE NO. 2

Fascination with the Folk

1920-30's renewed enthusiasm for left-leaning politics as a reaction to dehumanizing nature of the industrial revolution. Pete Seeger and Woodie Guthrie were among many who touted “folk” music as a way to rebel against the intervention of the industrial. The same elevation of “folk” remains a cornerstone of the far left approach to eliminating elitism in art.



[In capitalism] Historically, artists of the greatest skill would be more likely to find patronage and success than those of less talent. **Art became conceptualized as an activity of high skill restricted to a few gifted individuals of supreme talent.** The art of the overwhelming majority of people, who were equally capable of producing art but who lacked the privileges of the Great Artists and whose work was inevitably of a different standard, became **marginalized as rough and ready 'folk art' and not a serious aesthetic form.**

NOVEMBER, 1914 10 CENTS

The MASSES



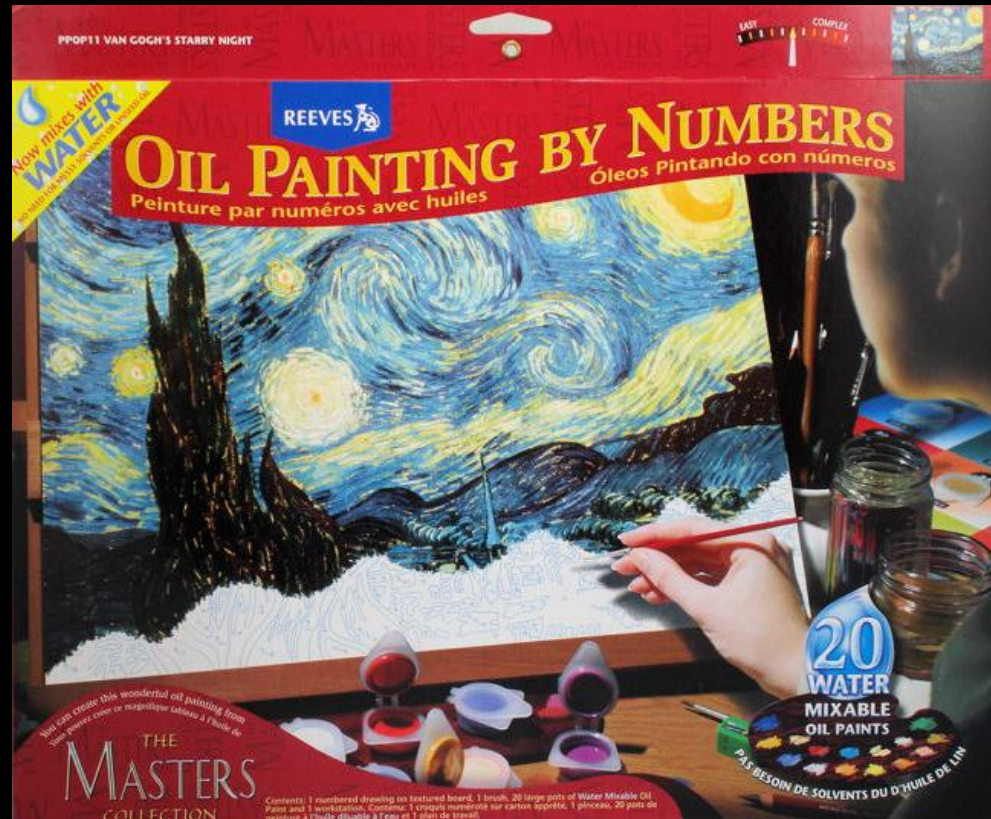
—Mother, never let me hear you tell the children that these humans
are descendants of ours."



In essence, the far right devalued skill for corporate gain while the far left simultaneously praised the absence of the barrier to participation that skill represents.

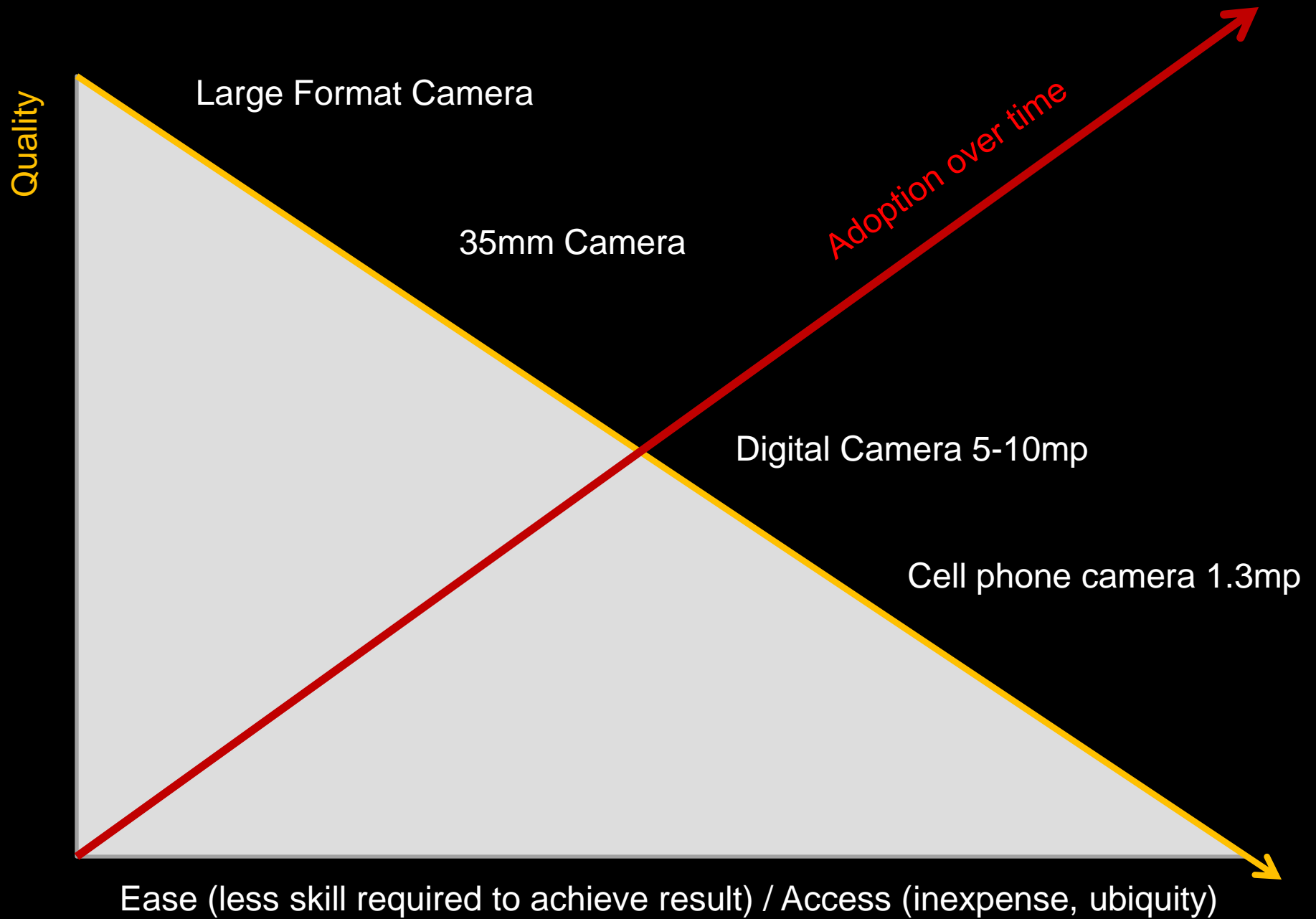
Just as there will be no workers, only people,
in a post-capitalist society, perhaps also there
will be no 'artists'. Or perhaps in socialism,
everyone will be an artist.

– The Socialist Standard



The Rise of Amateurism

These assaults on skill combined with an increasingly industrially homogenized environment lead to the association of the unskilled or unmitigated with the authentic



...it was easy to tell you weren't looking at film because the often smeary, muddy visuals looked about as bad as an old VHS tape. Audiences didn't seem to care, possibly because, after decades of watching battered home videos on standard-definition televisions, they were accustomed to degraded imagery. For many the pleasure of being able to rent a Billy Wilder movie at their leisure outweighed complaints about how lousy the videos looked. - New York Times on early digital films



Low production quality (amateurism) increasingly become conflated with authenticity









Mainstreaming Alternative



Proto Punk / DIY
Velvet Underground
(managed by Warhol)



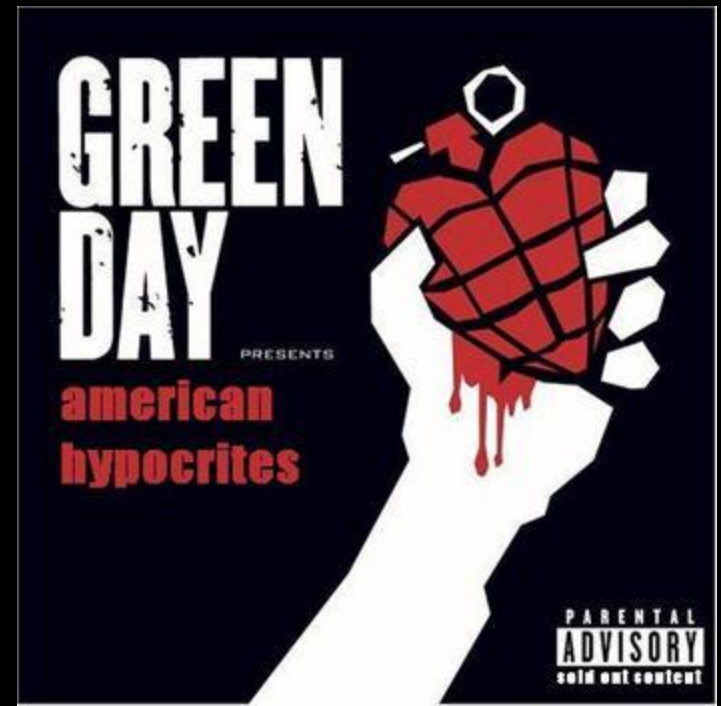
Punk / DIY
(the Ramones)



Grunge / Alternative
(Nirvana)

Punk bands that have achieved a modicum of mainstream success such as Green Day were seen as derivative of the original canon and also as "selling out" by a community that tries to avoid major record labels and access to widespread audiences as a conscious decision...

- Brian Cogan, counterblast.org

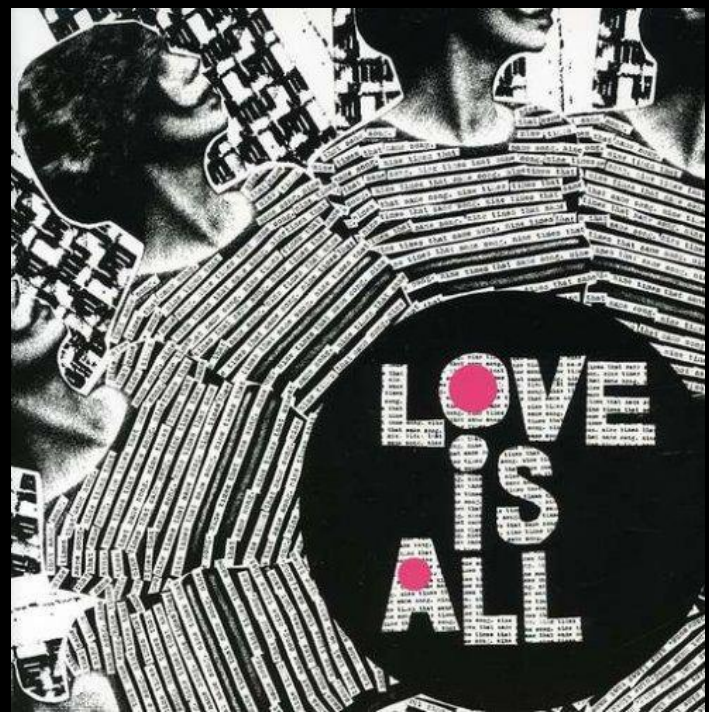
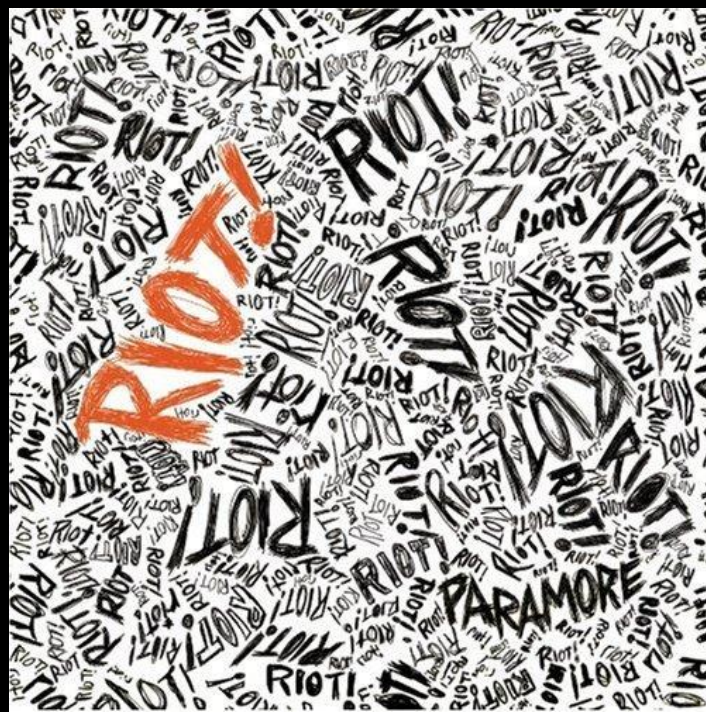


“Punk has gone from a small movement nurtured by a few to a building block of youth culture and popular culture. Without punk, music would sound very different today, and more importantly, without punk, youth would know less about how to interact communally. The model punk provided, although it is flawed and susceptible, is a fine example of how to assemble a social movement and then inject it into the mainstream.

- Francesca Olson, *Punk Rock Gets Eaten Up by the Mainstream*

“Yet, it remains within the subculture of punk music where the homemade, A4, stapled and photocopied fanzines of the late 1970s fostered the ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) production techniques of cut-n-paste letterforms, photocopied and collaged images, hand-scrawled and typewritten texts, to create a recognizable graphic design aesthetic.”







- First aired in the spring of 1989
- Need for new programming during the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike
- It introduced the camcorder look and cinéma vérité feel of much of later reality television

The Fake World and the “Real World”



But how “real” is this new authenticity

Just as musicians utilize low-fi sensibilities to evoke “diy” sentiment and reality television participants locate their behavior in the context of previously aired reality programs, artists have aligned their product with the expectations created by what was previously deemed authentic. In essence, co-opting a sort of false amateurism.





**Outside In:
The Assimilation of the Art Amateur**

Fetishizing the Amateur

Dr. Hans Prinzhorn:
Viennese psychiatrist
who had been trained
as an art historian in
the early twentieth
century. 1921 book
*Bildnerei der
Geisteskranken*
(*Artistry of the Mentally
Ill*), circulated in
Europe and was a
topic of interest among
avant-garde artists.



Jean Dubuffet

"I preferred 'Art Brut' instead of 'Art Obscur', because professional art does not seem to me any more visionary or lucid; rather the contrary....Why then do you write that gold in its raw state is more fake than imitation gold? I like it better as a nugget than as a watchcase. Long live fresh-drawn, warm, raw buffalo milk."





The encounters between artists and primitives resulted in an **unlearning of conventions by the trained in the face of these personal views of reality, independently expressed**. In essence, this reflected the prevailing concerns and currents of industrialized society, which ensured that **authenticity was valued over artistry**....

Matthew Gale, "Artistry, Authenticity and the Work of James Dixon and Alfred Wallis"



Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore





“It would be nice to say that the pot-head casualties, psychos, weirdos, wackos, and late-night innocents who created Shaw’s show had proved a return to the original use of the word ‘amateur,’ meaning to love. But they didn’t. They were too far gone. Still, in a world where fine art is often recognized less by its craft skills than by authorial pronouncement and context, it was a pleasure to see that professionals don’t have a monopoly on crap art, and that even amateurs can succeed in doing it badly.”

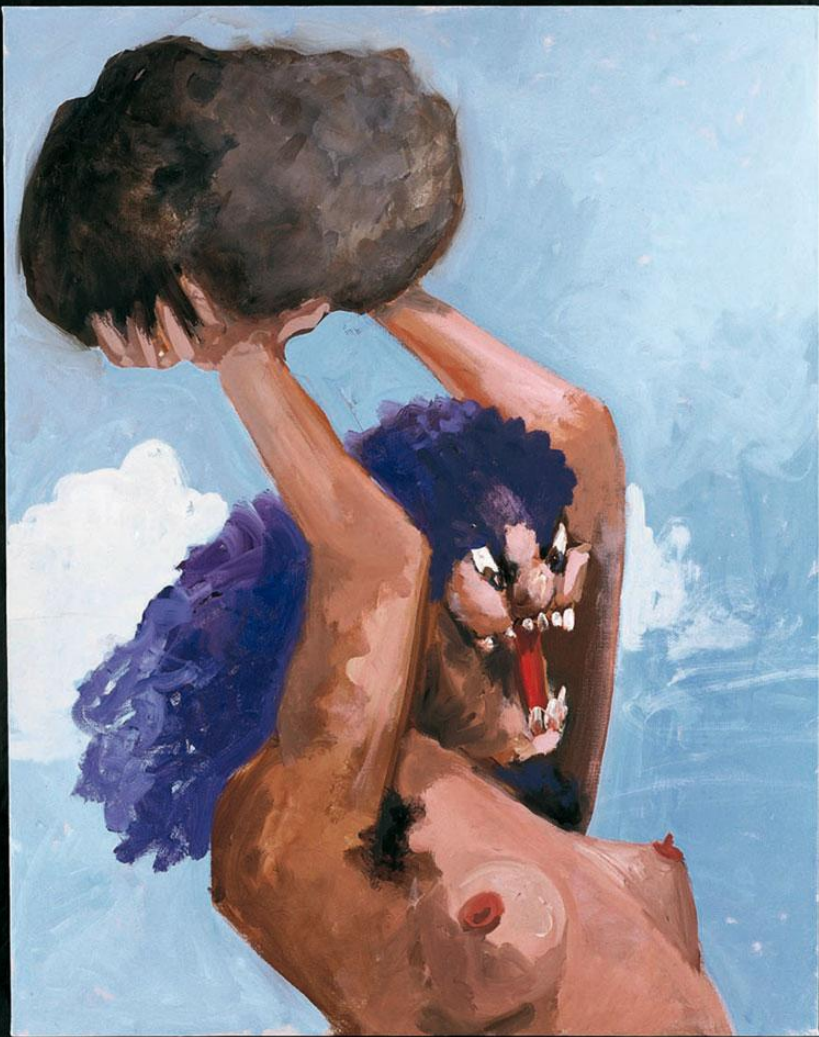
- Neal Brown, *Frieze*, 2001

Hideous, but also weirdly absorbing. Nothing comes between you and the subjects these people wanted to paint - **not skill, style, reputation or value**. There is **absolute sincerity** in the religious scenes, palpable psychosis in some of the fantasies. What you get is the message, never lost no matter how ineptly transcribed. There's also the pleasure of spotting a work that looks just like some of the **knowing cack-handedness** touted in London galleries last year, only with more **innocence and spark**.

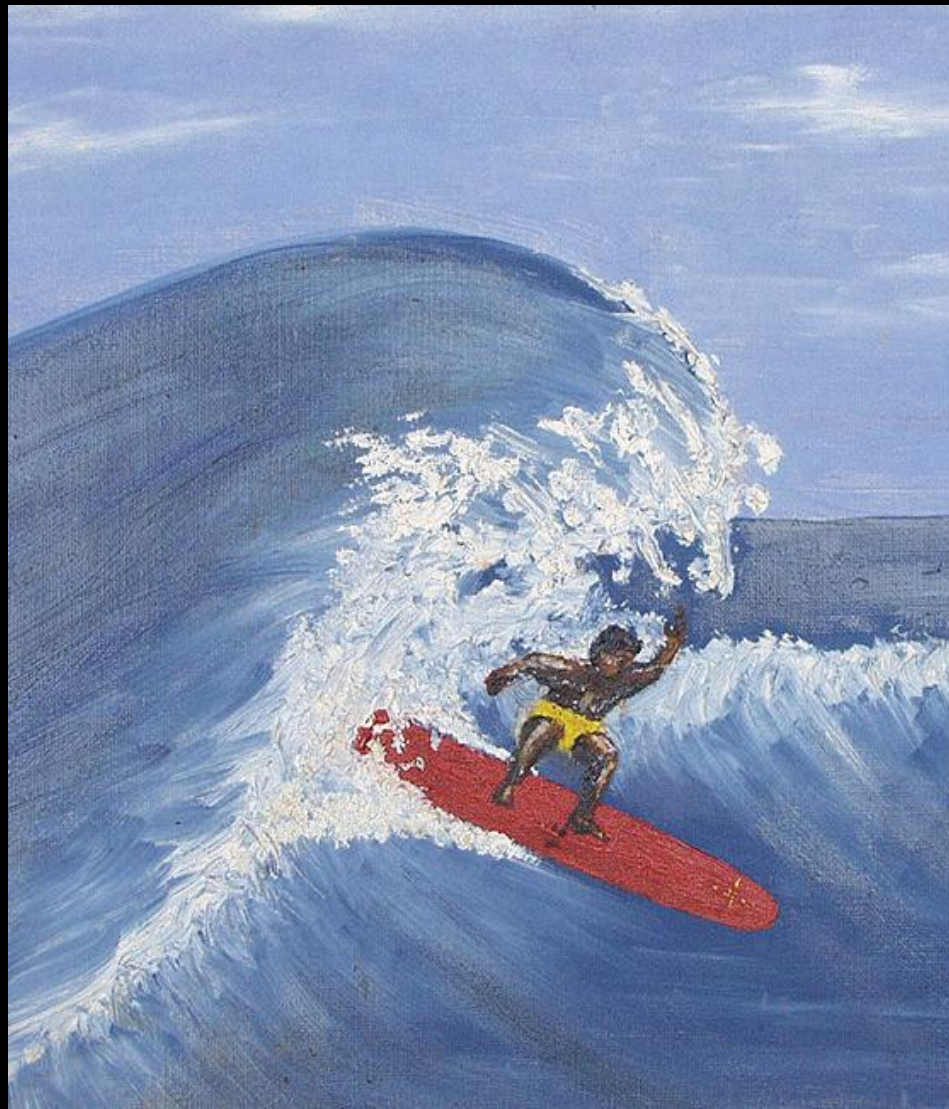
- Laura Cumming, *Guardian / The Observer*

Critics professing to be gobsmacked by these efforts can never have seen an amateur art show or walked along the railings of the Bayswater road. They should get out more. - Sarah Kent, *Time Out*





George Condo
Cavewoman Throwing a Rock



Thrift store painting - unknown

But to me de-skilled means **unlearning other people's ideas of skill. All great contemporary artists, schooled or not, are essentially self-taught and are de-skilling like crazy.** I don't look for skill in art; I look for originality, surprise, obsession, energy, experimentation, something visionary, and a willingness to embarrass oneself in public. **Skill has nothing to do with technical proficiency;** it has to do with being flexible and creative. I'm interested in people who rethink skill, who redefine or reimagine it: an engineer, say, who builds rockets from rocks.

- Jerry Saltz, Art Critic

Can We Really Tell the Difference?



Can We Really Tell the Difference?

- All participants preferred and judged as better the artists' works at a level significantly above chance.
- Labels had only a minimal influence.
- They resisted choosing the animal/child works even when these were falsely labeled as by an artist!
- When people selected the artists' works, they were far more likely to justify this choice by referring to the mind behind the art. When selecting a painting by abstract expressionist Mark Rothko, they said that the work looked intentional and planned; when selecting a child or animal work, they said that they liked the colors or brush strokes.



4-year-old



Hans Hoffman



**“Outsider art” created by professional
artist for film *Junebug***





Beyond the Street at Deitch Projects

Gestalten and Jeffrey Deitch cordially invite you to the North American launch of the newly released book

Beyond the Street: The 100 Leading Figures in Urban Art

Reception: Thursday May 27th, 6 - 8 pm

DEITCH PROJECTS
18 Wooster Street
New York, NY 10013

Kindly RSVP by May 26th
rsvp@gestalten.com

PLEASE NOTE: Although this is an open event, guests are required to RSVP. The gallery allows up to a maximum of 189 people on its premises at any one time.

Book signing with featured contributors including artists Dzine, Elbow-Toe, Faile, Gaia, José Parlá, Labrona, Logan Hicks, MOMO, Ron English, Saber, Sweet Toof and WK Interact

gestalten







Amateurism becomes a **mimicry** of what we have previously identified as **authentic**.

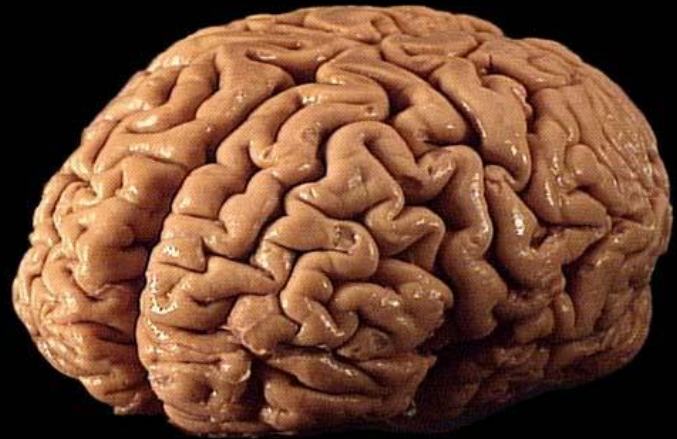
That authenticity has been increasingly defined by the **absence of commercial or institutional intervention**.

Does the elimination of the intermediary (the academy, commercial production or exhibition, hands-on skills etc.) lead to true authenticity?

Have we traded true authenticity for the appearance of authenticity?

Re-skilling and Pluralism

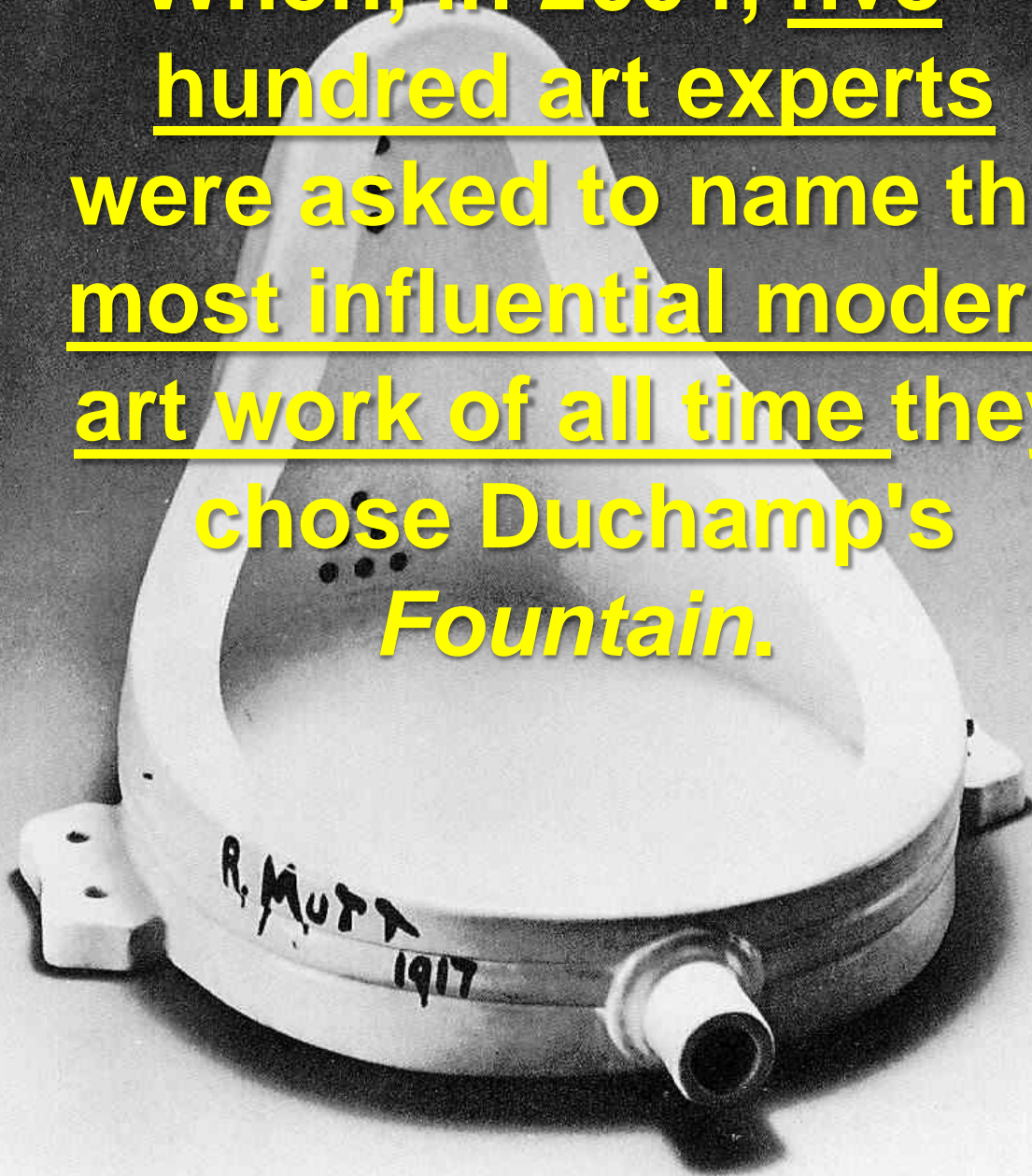
“Roberts wants to understand the readymade and its history in dynamic terms, as part of a dialectic of artistic deskillling and **reskilling (the adoption of nontraditional and new tools and techniques)**. This dialectical reconceptualization points toward alternative authoring strategies, particularly those kinds of collective and collaborative projects that have come to characterize advanced practices of the 21st century.”



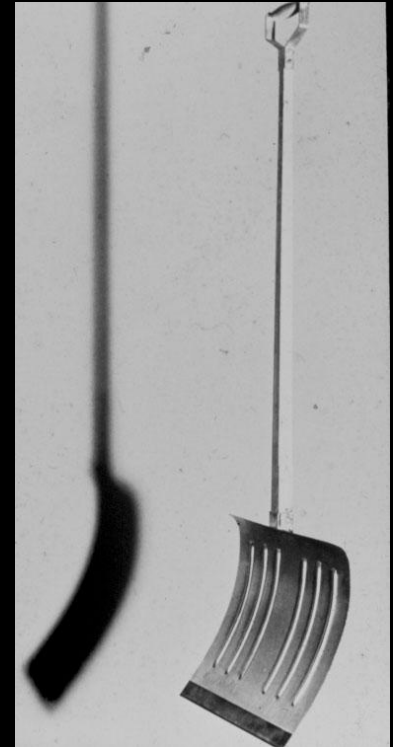
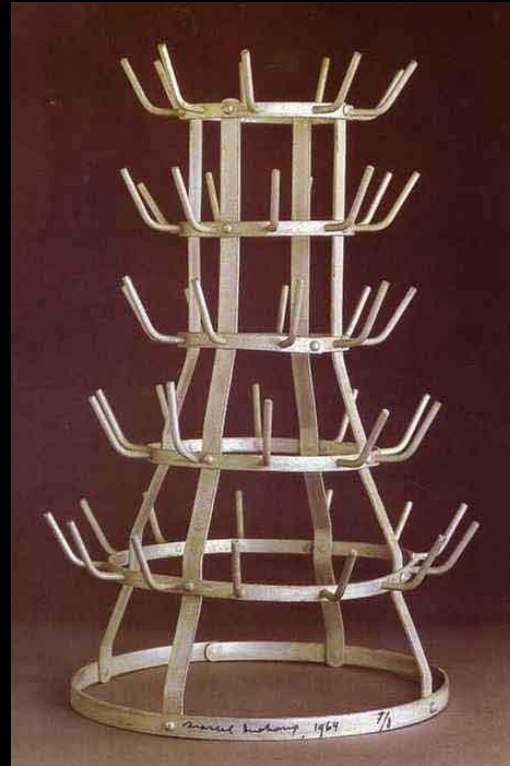


“inasmuch as the readymade pulled the concept of artistic authorship away from any obligation to craft skill and **promoted an understanding of art as thought based**, it also marked a moment of real alliance between the **nonproductive (but authored) labor of artmaking and the productive, anonymous labor of industry**. That is, Duchamp famously “chose” a urinal in a shop window and thereby nominated it as art, but the urinal also fundamentally remained an industrially produced object.”

When, in 2004, five hundred art experts were asked to name the most influential modern art work of all time they chose Duchamp's *Fountain*.



More Real than Real



*Duchamp's Fountain is the
art world's "Real World".*



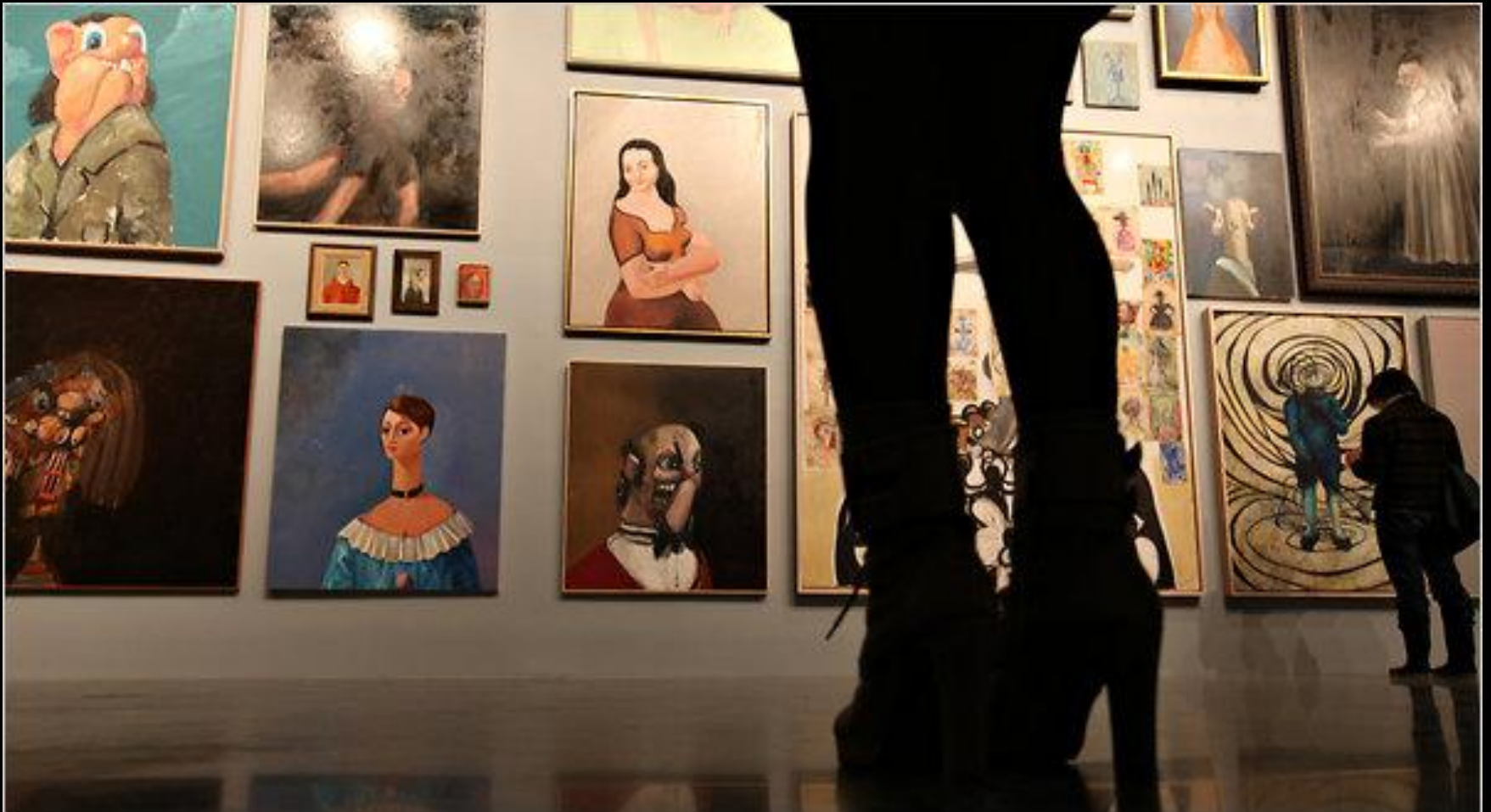
How does this lead to the pluralism of today?

"Greenberg was very much shunned and maligned by the art world in the late eighties onward. His idea that there was such a thing as quality and standards of excellence was the very opposite of what the art world became and is presently. **The irony is that the standard today is that there are no standards and that anything is art.**"

- Judy Singer



Mr. Condo is not a producer of single precious items consistent in style and long in the making. If that's what you want from painting, he'll disappoint you. He's an artist of **variety, plentitude and multiformity**. – *New York Times* review



Pluralism and Deskillling

“We’re witnessing an effort, a hundred years in the making, to legitimize ever-increasing kinds of objects as art, starting with a bottle rack and culminating in a shared meal. This is a kind of freedom, a freedom of possibilities, maximized to an absurd scale that moots a discussion about traditional media training. But it’s a dissipated freedom that gives rise to artworks as lethargic as their titles.

But where there is only freedom of possibility, there is effectively no freedom at all. There’s another kind of freedom that we need to address as teachers: the freedom of ability.

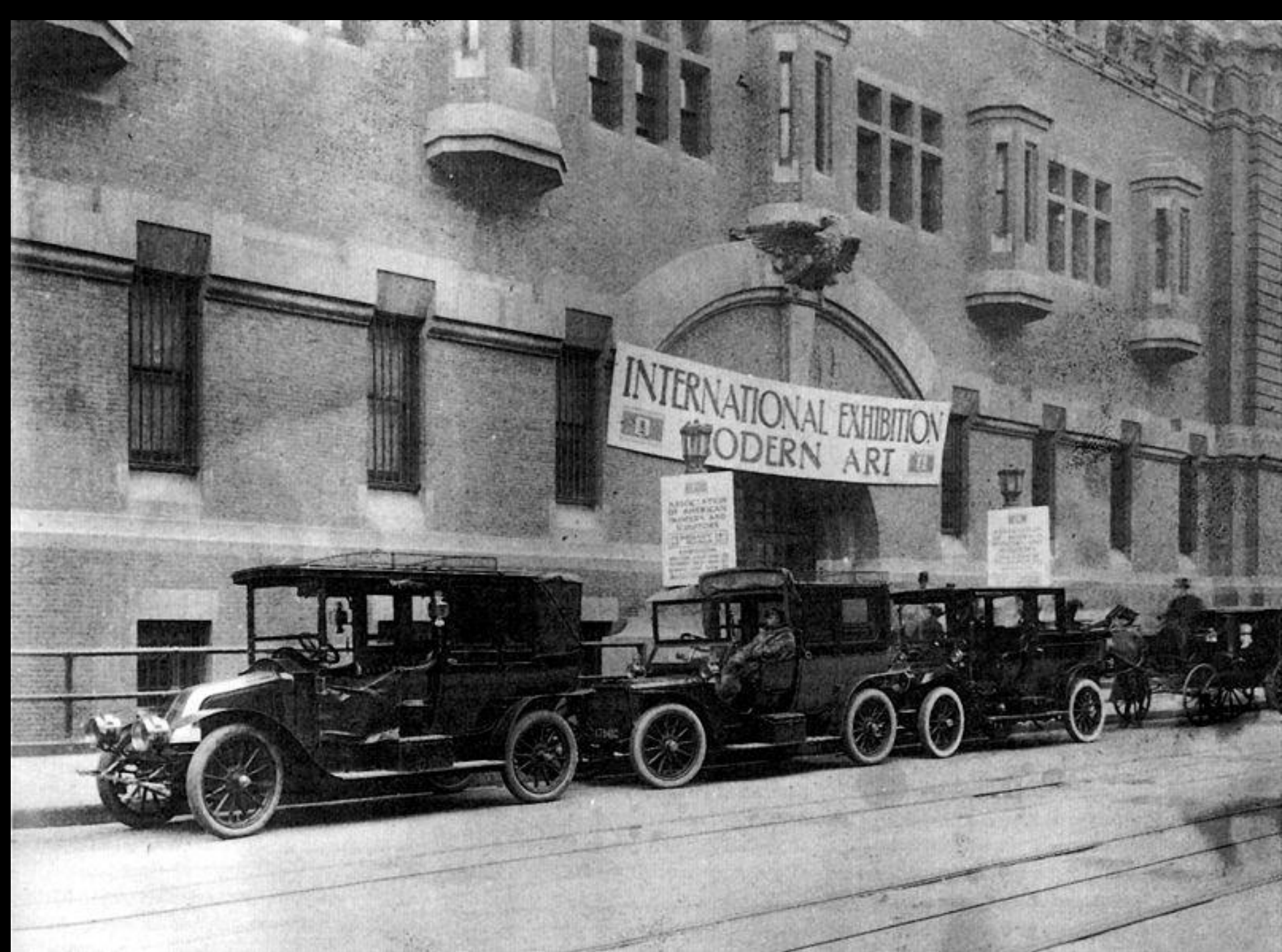
Against a background of freedom of possibility, which is more or less given, one has to develop freedom of ability by dint of practice— physical repetition of skills with the desire to produce a particular outcome. We should recognize that we are dealing with an entirely different sort of freedom here.”

- Franklin Einspruch

Call it what you will, contemporary cultural practice, post-studio art, postmodernism, post-retinal art, post-Fordian (post-industrialization) art, post-literate art, post-conceptual art, situational aesthetics... the intertextual, trans-disciplinary, cross-cultural, hypermediated, intersubjective, technology dependent **pedagogies that privilege concept, context and process over the intuitive experience of direct sensory aesthetic pleasure are so pervasive that they appear on course to eradicate hands-on studio training within a generation.**

Duchamp's Legacy: The De-skilling and Dematerializing Promotion of Concept Driven Cultural Practice. Brian Curtis

**This convergence of deskilling
and pluralism is how I came to
make art at the Armory Show**



Part consortium, part collective, INDEPENDENT lies somewhere between a collective exhibition and a reexamination of the art fair model, reflecting the changing attitudes and growing challenges for artists, galleries, curators and collectors.

The individual concepts for presentation are met with custom spaces that are curated in relation to one another, allowing for dynamic conversation between the exhibitions, participants, and visitors.

The international list of participating galleries, independent curators, publishers, and nonprofit spaces was developed through personal invitations from the founders, the advisors, and, ultimately, the participants themselves.

This approach has allowed the project to evolve through conversations, collaborations and shared conceptual arrangements as opposed to the application process that typically characterizes the contemporary art fair.

Through this ongoing interaction, the participants have entered into a consortium rather than a transactional arrangement with a governing party. Structured as a transparent financial cooperative, the collaborative process of INDEPENDENT allows for both financial efficiency and the creation of more ambitious projects.

INDEPENDENT





Joshua Field (b. 1973)
2981, 2011
Found text, dimensions Variable

More poignantly, as Burn saw it, **deskilled art as a genre didn't just devalue traditional skills; it devalued disciplined training itself.** What had been a democratizing impulse was inadvertently turned into a dumbing down, for, as Burn pointed out, “skills are not merely manual dexterity but forms of knowledge. The acquisition of particular skills implies an access to a body of accumulated knowledge. Thus deskilling means a rupture within a historical body of knowledge—in other words, a dehistoricization of the practice of art.”

Judith Rodenbeck, *Modern Painters* 2007



