Worth—Relevant Pretension Areas: *Comedie humaine*

TAI: Do you think she’s pretty?
CHER: No, she’s a full-on Monet.
TAI: What’s a monet?
CHER: It’s like a painting, see? From far away, it’s OK, but up close, it’s a big old mess.
—‘Clueless’

Under what gardener’s bell, with the help of what manure, as a result of what mixture of wine, beer, corrosive mucus and flatulent edema can have grown this sonorous and hairy pumpkin, this aesthetic belly, this imbecilic and impotent incarnation of the Self?
—Alexandre Dumas fils

I flooded the market with the ‘work’ of Palmer and many others, not for gain (I hope I am no materialist) but simply as a protest against the merchants who make capital out of those I am proud to call my brother artists, both living and dead.
—Tom Keating

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* contains a short story where once a year on another planet the government use a kind of roulette wheel to decide what to put in art galleries. Citizens submit works of art to the government, and these are given numbers, then they were assigned cash values according to the spins of the wheel. A poor cobbler painted a picture of his cat and it had an unprecedented run on the wheel and his painting was worth a billion while other wonderful paintings were taken away and burned. The wheel turned out to be rigged. Vonnegut wrote it round about the time cultural commentators such as Tom Wolfe in *The Painted Word*, and art critics like Harold Rosenberg were writing about the effects of the Art Market: the Metropolitan Museum made the news with its secret deals, the falsification of art history and the use of museum prestige to enhance investments. The bidding of buyers seemed to be no different than a fixed roulette wheel. For Rosenberg (1975: 274-277) at this point: “the necessity for an avant-garde has been replaced by the whimsicalities of competitive bidding […]. In the reign of the market the intellectual role of the artist, in which is embodied his [sic] social or philosophical motive for painting, is cancelled.” Wolfe had offered more of a social
comedy on the utter pretentiousness of the Art’s World that harked back to Balzac:

…the milieu of those who find it important to be in fashion, the orbit of those aristocrats, wealthy bourgeois, publishers, writers, journalists, impresarios, performers, who wish to be ‘where thing happen,’ the glamorous but small world of that creation of the nineteenth-century metropolis, tout le monde. Everybody, as in ‘everybody says’…the smart set in a phrase…’smart,’ with its overtones of cultivation as well as cynicism. (Wolfe, 1975:16)

Honoré Balzac was the author of La Comedie humaine: its young heroes were a mouthpiece for an entire youthful generation (a previously undisclosed social category) who epitomized the problematic existence encountered by the individual in post-revolutionary France (Eldrige, 2009). Like Tom Wolfe’s hipsters, the heroes of La Comédie Humaine attain their goals by pretending to have achieved them already in the right places. They discover that social success is everything, it is the key of power: going to the right parties, shiny shoes and glamorous fashionable clothes can open doors. Social success came through the patronage of the powerful women who ran the Salons, not via hard work in a profession. A more subtle device involves the use of a toothpick (although starving they walk along the street picking at their teeth so as to stand a better chance of being invited for a meal than someone who begs for food). Balzac noticed that financiers referred to this sort of thing as “creating confidence.”

The rise of the bourgeoisie and the increasing power of money made Balzac obsessed with the idea of genius and superior talent, again possibly shadowing the upheavals of the Revolution; Diderot also insisted on a new conception beyond talent. The artist’s worth was that they were: deviant in nature, original, they caused contempt on the part of the critics, they were beyond convention and morality, a hero, supersensitive, a god ordained misunderstood prophet martyr, a restless wanderer—suffering was the hallmark because the vulgar masses were incapable of comprehending! Balzac was big on the ‘tormented genius’ and his obsession with his public persona led him to craft his own mythical image.

Who tells us art is worth something? What is it that we think it is worth? Where does worth come from? If we say it all comes down to personal taste—‘it is all relative’—little can be defended, debated, learned or discovered and we might as well be silent on the matter. But does this just mean that after it has annoyed us the matter of Worth just disappear like the Cheshire Cat leaving a distinctive mischievous grin? If interpretation is relative then that implies we have to relate and compare one thing to another amongst ourselves for the purposes of making a judgment to improve our lives—to find out what is relevant for us. Relativism is a conclusion that implies no dialogue, it terminates it: a decision has been somehow previously made that may well be prejudiced; but without dialogue no dialogue is possible to discover this. Worth will have a strong a priori relation to certain important people’s taste and how they direct it (if they own it then it must be worth something). What Vonnegut, Wolfe, Rosenberg, Diderot, Balzac and possibly the Cheshire Cat were struggling against was the control of the debate on Worth: the determination of what was relevant or irrelevant. At Christie’s, the great clearinghouse of
heirlooms and old masters, the final judgment from which there is no appeal comes when
the bidding ceases and the hammer falls: **is it then that the worth of an art work known
decisively?**

The term ‘The Establishment’ points to the overlap of culture and authority. This overlap
might involve the ideological use of cultural products for the legitimation of power: the
bureaucratic use of culture by the personnel of authoritative institutions. If the
Establishment is a traffic between culture and authority, then the co-operation of artists
means an exchange that includes money, career, privilege; and it includes a special form of
Worth: *prestige*. This is almost a zone where culture and authority combine because of
numerous ‘prestigious social occasions’. In every nation the high Art World is a close
adjunct of national authority and a leading agency of nationalist propaganda. What is called
‘the climate of opinion’ refers to the points of national reference for the producers, the
consumers, and the products of art. It refers to those who are fashion-leaders in matters of
cultural and political opinion; and who privately, as well as formally, certify other’s worth
—rather like the Queen knighting someone. In the end, what is ‘established’ are definitions
of reality, judgments of value, canons of taste and of beauty and Worth. **Where do our
values of worth come from and how are they maintained? Are creators and viewers
of art socialized to more or less agree upon aesthetic codes and conventions?**

In as much as it is a form of power ‘Worth’ resides wherever we believe it to reside, and
have been told by some form of authority —and we can certainly be confused about that or
engage in *bad faith*. As Max Weber put it:

> One of the important aspects of the ‘existence’ of a modern state, precisely as a
complex of social interaction of individual persons, consists in the fact that the
action of various individuals is orientated to the belief that it exists or should exist.
(Gerth & Mills, 1970: 181)
Worth seems like a form of assessment: esteem. But what of the artists who are alienated from this Establishment—take for instance the “sonorous and hairy pumpkin” remark by Alexander Dumas fils aimed at Courbet, who he also called the ‘painter of pears’. What do such social conflicts achieve? There seems to be something of a history of artists attacking each other’s worth with insults; Marina Galperina (2011) has gathered up some examples of the bitching:

- Frida Kahlo on the Surrealists: “They are so damn ‘intellectual’ and rotten that I can’t stand them anymore… I’d rather sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than have anything to do with those ‘artistic’ bitches of Paris.

- Andy Warhol on Jasper Johns: “Oh, I think he’s great. He makes such great lunches.”

- Marc Chagall on Pablo Picasso: “What a genius, that Picasso… It’s a pity he doesn’t paint.”

- Pierre-Auguste Renoir on Leonardo da Vinci: “He bores me. He ought to have stuck to his flying machines.”

- Edgar Degas on Georges-Pierre Seurat: “I wouldn’t have noticed it except that it was so big.”

- Francis Bacon on Jackson Pollock: “Jackson Pollock’s paintings might be very pretty but they’re just decoration. I always think they look like old lace.”

- Willem de Kooning to Andy Warhol (at a party): “You’re a killer of art, you’re a killer of beauty, you’re even a killer of laughter. I can’t bear your work!”

- Francis Bacon on Henri Matisse: “I’ve never liked his things very much, except the very, very early things… I loathe them. I can never see what there is to it, with all those squallid little forms. I can’t bear the drawings either—I absolutely hate his line. I find his line sickly.”

- Andy Warhol on Julian Schnabel (in his diary): “Julian Schnabel called and said he was coming by with that rock person, Captain Beefheart. And we didn’t want him to, and then I got worried that Julian might have heard what I’d been saying about him—that he goes around to other artists’ studios to find things to copy.”

- Nicolas Poussin on Caravaggio: “Caravaggio’s art is painting for lackeys. This man has come into the world to destroy painting.”
Gustave Courbet on Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*: “It’s flat, it isn’t modeled. It’s like the Queen of Hearts after a bath.”

So as if things were not bad enough for artists they have a tendency to devalue each other’s worth: meaning you have to develop a thick skin to survive, to prove your worth. Part of this seems to be that artistic jealousy and rivalry are enormous motive forces for many artists—they propel them forward. **What does this mean for Worth? Does competition make better art? Is worth success?**

Here the problem of self-worth is interesting: as an artist you will have to believe in yourself. The effect the Art World can have on the self esteem of individuals is usually avoided by everyone in the arts; yet one sees difficulties everywhere. William James gave an interesting definition in his (1890) *The Principles of Psychology,* this went:

\[
\text{Self-esteem} = \frac{\text{Success}}{\text{Pretensions}}
\]

James viewed self-esteem as an evaluative process; our idea of self-worth was measured as the ratio of a person's successes to their pretensions. Pretensions mean goals, purposes or aims. Success constitutes the perception of the attainment of those goals. Our wellbeing is about diminishing the denominator and increasing the numerator with self esteem being the product.

'Pretensions' (and what artist isn't pretentious) add a vulnerability component to self-worth: if you come up short in your perception of attaining your goals in comparison with others in the same 'pretension arena,' self-worth suffers. Yet if I admit to being hopeless at things that are genuinely not important to me it does not result in a devaluation of personal worth. James discussed the problem as the rivalry and conflict of the different selves and added that those who wish to rule or influence find out their victim's strongest principle of self-regard, so as to make that 'the fulcrum of all appeals.' The Stoic recipe for contentment was to dispossess yourself in advance of all that was out of your own power. For thinkers like Epicurus, humans can discern a law of nature and so submit to it with honour and dignity. The analogy was a dog tied to a cart. It can struggle against the direction it is being taken, but it will still be taken there, and painfully. Or it can choose to follow obediently in the wheel tracks of the cart. Here the threat of moral evil is converted into good: we help to 'create' the truths that we 'register'.

But artistic worth might not come from any elaborate explanation as to why it has changed this or that or achieved this or that. Mulkay & Chaplin (1982) provided documentary evidence to show that the 'meteoric' success of Jackson Pollock was not due to a coherent aesthetic evaluation by the New York Art World. Pollock’s sudden artistic worth was directly brought about by collective action in the form of a promotional campaign on the part of the Art World.
directly brought about by collective action in the form of a promotional campaign on the part of a small, but influential group of people closely associated with the artist—you might say all they needed was a poor cobbler who painted a picture of his cat. Drawing on Mulkay & Chaplin (1982) we can gain three more general models of ‘Artistic Success’ if we see success as related to worth in the sense that James did: these are: (1) The model of aesthetic appraisal (2) The model of social influence and (3) The model of cultural persuasion:

(1) The model of aesthetic appraisal. This relates to situations in which there are fairly explicit aesthetic criteria generally available among the people who are actively concerned with the evaluation of new art products. Here Aesthetic criteria precede the art products to which they are applied. So if authors of published responses to an artist's work are in reasonable agreement from the outset about the standards to be applied to the art, then we expect a rise in preeminent worth to follow from positive, similar judgments of art in relation to these standards by various independent actors.

(2) The model of social influence. This is largely the opposite: there are no well-established principles of artistic judgment—here artistic success occurs without the creation of a new aesthetic, it occurs with little aesthetic agreement. Although aesthetic principles may in due course be adjusted to innovation, these adjustments occur after artistic success has been achieved. So you become accepted as a major artist while most of the responses to your work radically disagreed about the basis of its aesthetic value, and your artistic talent.

(3) The model of cultural persuasion. This is in between. The originators of each new art movement have to create a new basis for aesthetic judgment that is appropriate to their unconventional products. Artistic success is constituted through participants' adoption of a new aesthetic perspective. Here social and aesthetic changes occur together. Artistic success occurs insofar as people are persuaded to adopt a new aesthetic code. Here the critics gradually adopt the aesthetic views of the new interpreters and come to agree about the features of artistic significance. With increasing clarity the grounds on which the work is to be evaluated as outstanding emerges for the critic.

So Boy Bands, the Velvet Underground and Punk Rock (before, after and during). So an art work might be seen as part of a lineage and placed this way as part of the hype. Linking art to an acknowledged masters’ significance can also be established by suggesting the artist has extended the masters’ achievement—that at some level its worth would then have to be explained is avoided. Here the hype would just focus on formal qualities such as colour and design. We do not have to explain any clear idea of what contribution colour should make in general to an art work, or offer any idea of what the artist is expected to achieve in terms of colour—we are just saying things like “she has a remarkably fine sense of colour like such and such” or even the daring “profound originality like such and such.” Much the same goes for form, here evocative imagery and wayward analogy can let rip: we can employ any idiosyncratic vocabulary and criteria of worth, as long as there appears to be no common aesthetic repertoire and, therefore, no way of comparing judgments along similar dimensions. This was the type of art magazine hype that Tom Wolfe mocked in The Painted Word—pointing out Clement Greenberg’s ridiculous obsession with ‘flatness’ as an indicator of Worth.

The present absence of a common aesthetic language is strongly indicative of a lack of shared evaluative standards. Critics use stock phrases the same as in football: “discipline versus expressiveness.” For the more conservative art theorists, the division between control over one’s painting technique and the lack of it is synonymous with the division between art and non-art—if the artist had no control over what s/he was doing well you know it cannot be art. The flip side of that is because it was too controlled, it could not claim recognition as significant ‘world art.’ Too much expression and too much discipline...
claim recognition as significant ‘world art.’ Too much expression and too much discipline are, therefore, both potential artistic defects. This to-ing and fro-ing is as near a generally shared criterion of artistic worth than anything else. But then you are into the quagmire of actually attempting to specify what the expressiveness involves, that is, what it is that the artist was seeking to express through their art. What if after all your hype and theories the artist turns round and says ‘no it’s actually something else?’ Is determining this a significant part of the worth of a work of art in the mind of the professional critic?

It might be that the critics also fall back on simple bitching. Flint (1983) stated that the greater part of all the art criticism that has ever been written has been moralistic in tone or content: “often vehemently moralistic, dealing quite freely in adjectives like ‘noble’ and ‘exalted’ or ‘base’, ‘vile’, ‘corrupt’, ‘sordid’, and ‘vicious’.” She studied art criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries looking at the way in which notions of worth and value are transmitted through the employment of ethical and moral assumptions that highlighted some of the consciously and unconsciously voiced beliefs which sustained the dominant ideology of late Victorian England.

Evaluation of talent is where you fall back on standing in relation to other artists. This goes like this: (a) talented, (b) extremely talented, and (c) a genius. Conceivably ‘untalented’ could be a valuable term if we were back to the model of cultural persuasion. All this seems to see the primary role of criticism as to label works of art as good, bad, and middling and to defend the decision; that is the function of art journalism in its role as a stimulant to the market. The typical expression of practical worth is money. The typical expression of aesthetic value, on the contrary, is love. It’s worth is what it is, not what it can be exchanged for; its value is immediate; its pleasure-satisfaction is not anticipatory (as in a future worth in terms of price or if you can wade through the lengthy and expensive writing that explains why it is good). A sense of worth comes from a feeling of union with a universal beauty: these are the personal qualities that distinguish aesthetic values.

But you might well believe that we live in a Meritocracy, where a sense of worth is earned because artists compete in a marketplace. The word ‘meritocracy’ was invented by Michael Young in his (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a satirical polemic about the British education system. The ‘Meritocratic Class’ had gained a monopoly on ‘merit’ having got together with the people who run the symbols and the designators of merit, to perpetuate their own power, status, and privilege. Set in the future the book sets out the macabre gradual triumph of the IQ-driven education system that had emerged in the UK during the war years. In the book IQ testing continues throughout your life and the job you get is allocated by strictly ‘meritocratic’ standards, i.e. by your current IQ. The book follows the system to its collapse: how this came about is what the bewildered author is trying to find out. A footnote tells us of his death at the hands of rebels against the system. Young wrote in to the Guardian in 2001 pointing out it was a satire when Tony Blair started prominently using ‘Meritocracy’ as part of running the country— to define what our society should aspire to. What did people see in the concept of a ‘Meritocracy’?
According to Baumann (2001) sociologists of culture rely on three main factors to explain the public acceptance of a cultural product such as art:

(1) The grounding of artistic worth in a legitimating ideology.

(2) The institutionalization of resources and practices of production and consumption by members within the art world.

(3) The changing opportunity space brought about by social change outside the art world.

These would seem to match the Mulkay & Chaplin (1982) model of ‘Artistic Success’: (1) The model of aesthetic appraisal (2) The model of social influence and (3) The model of cultural persuasion.

So with Baumann’s (1) whether a genre succeeds in earning recognition as art depends on the shape of the "opportunity space." This is defined by the appearance of "competitors," "substitutes," and the formation of a pool of high-status "patrons" who can act as sponsors. A newly popular substitute or competitor can act as a foil against which a cultural genre's artistic status is enhanced—hence all the bitching at parties and in diaries. Really this is back to a cultural product's association with a high-status audience and how that legitimates the product as art. These imputations of worth are simulated to be rooted outside the Art World rather like in marketing.

With (2) we rely on the importance of organizations and networks in art. The artist might feel at the centre of the Art World, but the participation of many different collaborators is essential for art to maintain its status as art.

With (3) we are talking about Bourdieu's (1993) somewhat sponge like concept of a "field" of cultural production: this is made of the relations between cultural producers and consumers. A cultural field comes into being when cultural production begins to enjoy autonomy from other existing fields in the type of capital available to cultural producers. In any given field, actors engage in competition for capital. To the extent that there is a distinct form of symbolic capital available to consecrate cultural products of a particular genre, the field is more autonomous. To my mind Bourdieu did not really think in terms of artist run projects.

What we haven’t considered here is the temporal side of art: the transient materiality in contemporary cultural artifacts. Whereas artists like Albrecht Durer boasted his work...
Contemporary cultural artifacts. Whereas Albrecht Durer boasted his work would last seven hundred years, with some art what's on offer is the fleeting art installation or art that emulates the throw-away manufactured product. Permanence was a self-conscious avowed characteristic of the worth of the great work of art for Durer. Using precious materials or skills, the artist offered objects that would last like eternal virtues, even with modern art we see objects that were a counterpoint to the mass-manufactured industrial product. The dualism inherent in the experience of modernity was characterized by Charles Baudelaire’s (1863) *The Painter of Modern Life*, in a way that owed something to Diderot and Balzac. Here the determination of worth relates to: originality, modesty, a lack of need for approval, a desire to be anonymous, a lack of ulterior motives and an obsession with a world of images. He described these dilemmas and contradictions: "By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable." For Baudelaire the artist extracts from fashion: "whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory." Baudelaire's definition and insights are an early glimpse into the paradoxes of art and capitalism and continue to be relevant. The opposition of the permanent and the timeless to the fugitive and ephemeral, encapsulates the dilemma of modern cultural production: made to last (and therefore worth something), or obsolescent (in other words worthless). Fashion exists in a state of transience: this change is fuelled by consumerism. To resolve this the more restrictive strains of modernist design attempted to provide us with 'ideal' object types: furniture was ideologically transformed into equipment, with the elimination of all unnecessary knick-knacks: ornament was crime (Sandino, 2004). Le Corbusier's attack on what he termed 'sentiment-objects' is echoed in the current popular interest in clutter management when Michael Landy spent a fortnight destroying all his belongings in an art piece entitled 'Breakdown' including well-known artists.

To conclude, Joseph Beuys debated with two professors (of Financial Sciences and Political Economics) and a banker on the theme ‘What is Money,’ Beuys insisted that, following Marx, money is like a contract or a bill of rights that we receive for our energies as a wage and which entitles us to a share of our collective energies, as commodities. Beuys —something of a P. T. Barnum—wanted us to imagine how money could be transformed to facilitate a world where ‘everyone is an artist’ or, more accurately, where everyone’s creativity and artistry can actually be recognized and valued: rather than art be transformed to do so.

If I look for the objective nature of money, I conclude today that the illness is rooted in the fact money is still an economic value in the economy, and that sick money will only be cured if money is recognized as a document of rights. Money has to undergo a metamorphosis again, it has to relinquish its role in the market economy and engage in an economy of capacities. Then we would be concerned with human creative productivity. And we would come full circle, since each human being can then act within his company as co-creator of the future, can ‘in full dignity’ contribute to shaping this future.

Yes we could use Kurt Vonnegut’s big roulette wheel, establish a meritocracy, hype a fake version of cobbler’s cat and Michael Landy can destroy all the good stuff that didn’t win.

References


