A POOR MAN'S HOLLYWOOD:
THE FALLOW STATE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

What the following has to do with this publication's theme of "frenzy" is simply that I'm about to go into one: a lot of contemporary art—too much contemporary art—sucks.

Over the last thirty years or so, contemporary art has lost its grip on something very valuable and reached, instead, for something rather common and vulgar. Saying this, I know I'll be perceived by some readers—especially a good many close to the contemporary art world—as a formerly progressive artist and critic who's simply gotten old and closed-minded, who's nostalgic for the abstract painting and sculpture so prominent in his youth and who's bitter about its passing from a position of prominence. So let me say something at the outset about youth and progressivism, age and conservatism, and the problem of trying to stand outside of one's own time in order to form a credible judgement about it. Turn the situation on its head: If it's predictable that an artist and critic who's approaching 60 feels that art has lately started to go to hell in a handbasket, why isn't it predictable that so many younger artists and critics feel that art has lately been getting better and better? The same thing goes for other probable complaints about the author's resumé: sex, race and

nationality. My point is that we all have our vested interests, conscious and unconscious, and, to a certain degree, we all tend to see things the way we do because of them. Vested interests do equal damage to all sides of an argument.

Now, to the point: To paraphrase a Randy Newman lyric from "Good Old Boys": "What has happened down here is the wind has changed. . .There's six feet of water in the streets of Evangeline." Evangeline is the art world, or the world of art, and the six feet of water (sludge, I sometimes think) is more like an intense and pervasive malaise derived, ironically, from the fallout from the ultimate success modern art has had, over the last half-century, in the public arena.

What was, circa 1949, a ratty, esoteric cult involving a couple dozen galleries, a couple hundred artists, and an aggregate audience smaller than the crowd at a single Knicks game, has become. . .oh, just check out the vast column inches devoted to the galleries in any Friday *New York Times*. I say "derived, ironically" because as I see the current situation, a crucial part of the public—the brie and chardonnay set, if you will, or, to quote British Labour politician Neil Kinnock, "the chattering classes"—doesn't, down deep, give much of a rat's ass about contemporary art. Oh, it might care about who's hot and who's not, or (momentarily) about an art-world scandal or censorship brouhaha, but it doesn't care much about the art.

One index is what's happened on my job as art critic for *Newsweek* (which isn't, as is *The New York Times*, a hometown newspaper for the one city in America where contemporary art is a vital industry): I get into its pages less and less frequently with pieces that are directly about contemporary art, even counting pieces that aren't reviews but, rather, are about the market or some tsuris in the museum or auction business. At the high point in 1990, my second year at *Newsweek*, I had 31 pieces in the magazine. In 1999, I contributed about two-thirds of that. As much as I hate to admit it, the magazine—which serves a general, educated public—just isn't as interested in putting contemporary art into its menu of cultural coverage as it used to be.

Another, more subjective measure, is the eyes-rolled-heavenward look I get from friends outside the art world when they ask what art I've seen late-

ly, and I tell them. Here's an example, via a press release excerpt, that's typical of the apologia for exhibitions that I get all the time. This one concerns the installation artist Lee Mengwei:

"The Letter-Writing Project" invites us to write letters that we've always meant to write, but have never had the chance to compose. Lee Mengwei has constructed three booths that correspond to the Buddhist meditation positions of

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standing, sitting and kneeling. He asks us to reflect on themes of gratitude, insight, and forgiveness while engaging in the everyday experience of writing a letter. Finished letters can be sealed or left open for other visitors to read. All letters left unaddressed will be ceremonially burnt by the artist in a ritual which places the letters in paper lanterns on a river. In Lee Mengwei's own words, the letters' "strong emotions will be carried away, going up to the sky or sinking in the water."

In Hollywood, this would be called a "high concept project," meaning that it's so obvious only an idiot could fail to get the point—in this case, therapeutic goodness. We're asked to reflect on gratitude, forgiveness and insight, which here sound like pretentious surrogates for home, mother and apple pie. "The Letter-Writing Project" seems to comprise a bunch of sentimental bromides, dressed up in therapeutic language, describing a fairly obvious, if benign, ritual that hardly anybody would disagree with.

I mean, is there anybody out there who's against reflection, gratitude, forgiveness, insight, paper lanterns or rivers? (The piece, I have to say in fairness, does look nice, but little of the deep meaning attributed to it by the press release emerges from its warm glow of exotic décor.)

Here's another bit of revealing art flackery, about an exhibition in the Netherlands by the young Los Angeles installation artist Jason Rhoades (whose work often resembles a totally unsuccessful garage sale):

In this, the metaphor of the human body—more specifically the vital organs and the brain—is used for an examination of the basic principles of the creation myth. Rhoades uncovers the process of the mental handling of images, impressions and impulses. He asks himself why one thing is being stored in the brain and the other not. And also: what role do moral principles like good and evil play in this?

The sin here is what I'd call gross conceptual overreach. If Rhoades's work uncovered even .0001 percent of "the process of the mental handling of images," he'd get a Nobel Prize. And as for asking "what role do moral principles like good and evil play in this," we're talking serious posturing here. In "The Letter-Writing Project" and Rhoades's installation we have two examples of the tremendous, all-pervading self-importance of a good deal of contemporary art.

The phrase most in circulation among the denizens of the contemporary art world concerns art that "deals with the issue of. . ." Usually, the work in question merely illustrates some aspect of the issue, or tenders a complaint that it exists, or makes a sarcastic or ironic comment on it. But hardly ever does it "deal with" an issue in the sense of proffering a thoughtful solution, or even presenting a thoughtful argument. Perhaps the work can't do either of these things because it's not in the nature of art to provide solutions or thoughtful arguments to burning issues. And perhaps, as some claim, the cluttered inclusiveness of Rhoades's work is a direct manifestation of the artist's profound doubt about the ability of a work of art to mean anything. But if these are the cases, a little modesty, a little tentativeness—hell, a little less space occupied by Rhoades's installations—would seem to be in order.

Self-importance is, however, but one side of the dubious coin of much contempoary art. Another clique of artists they call YBA, or "Young British

Artists," have lower, but wider, aspirations. As Cosmo Landesman put it in *The Sunday Times* of London, October 11, 1998:

The less artists have to say, the more they want to talk. . .Artists now rush in where once they feared to tread—or at least felt they had no place. Damien Hirst sets up a restaurant, [Tracey] Emin a museum and Sarah Lucas a shop. [Sam] Taylor-Wood makes videos with Kylie Minogue, and last week saw [Gavin] Turk's name turning up on designs at London Fashion Week. Music has become the chic medium of the month.

There's a new breed of wannabe on the cultural scene—they're the ones who found the creative career they had always wanted, but now they want to be and do something else. David Bowie wants to be an art critic, Sting wants to be a serious actor and Ron Wood of the Stones wants to be a painter. And Young British Artists want to be the new Bowie, Sting and Wood of the "Sonic Art" scene.

You might argue in rebuttal that the above is a distinctively British phenomenon. While it's true that artists in the U.K. (from Richard Hamilton's Pop-Art-originating collages in the mid-1950s to those artists mentioned by Landesman who were included in the notorious "Sensation" exhibition) have embraced popular culture more passionately than their American counterparts, it's also true that the gap has almost disappeared in the two years since Landesman wrote his screed. You might more tellingly claim that what Landesman says is just the latest in a long line of conservative reactions of the popular press to adventuresome new art that breaks down boundaries. You might point out—I'm posing a hypothetical case here—that a lot of cultural journalists back in 1930 preferred to cover Howard Hawks's "Hell's Angels," a blockbuster movie about First World War aviators with Jean Harlow as an ornament, to giving space to Salvador Dalí's and Luis Buñuel's infamous "L'age d'or," their supremely anti-church avant-garde film. But there's a big difference. Dalí and Buñuel were trying to be different. They were thumbing their

noses at conventional entertainment. The artists Landesman's talking about are aping conventional entertainment. No matter how much Sting and the Stones diverge from Steve Lawrence and Lawrence Welk, they still constitute conventional entertainment. The fact that they emit a little bit of the aura of transgressiveness—that is, outrageousness and anti-social behavior—doesn't obviate the fact that what they produce is still corporately distributed conventional entertainment.

So here's the second big problem with a lot of contemporary art: it has avant-garded, post-avant-garded, transavant-garded, chic-ed and reverse-chic-ed itself into becoming merely a downtown, black-clad segment of the entertainment industry. An increasing percentage of contemporary art exhibitions look like gratuitously esoteric, under-budgeted versions of special-effects movies and dry-ice rock concerts. If the contemporary art world were one of those production companies operating under the aegis of a major movie studio, its name might be something like Transgressive Installations, Inc. But because contemporary art still clings in most cases to a few traditional aspects of art—authorship by a single individual, cheap production values, display in

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rooms relatively small compared to sports arenas and concert halls, and obfuscating language in its public relations handouts—it never quite manages to get off the schneid compared to movies, television, rock music and spectator sports. Somebody once said, "Politics is show business for ugly people." Contemporary art has become ugly business for wannabe show people.

The practical trouble with this is that the hipper precincts of the entertainment industry already give the part of the public that wants it much slicker, bigger and overall more effective phenomena of pseudo-transgression. So then the sophisticated public doesn't give a rat's ass about contemporary art anymore because contemporary art has become merely a low-rent version of

pseudo-transgressive entertainment. Yes, the sophisticated public still cares a little about artists who are thought to be "hot," or about to make leaps into the movie business or put out a CD, but it doesn't care much about their art, per se. And mass-market newspapers and magazines care less and less about covering contemporary art as a separate phenomenon because it's not that much different anymore from the product of the entertainment industry.

And here's where what's going on with a lot of contemporary art digs its own grave and, in the process, makes life harder for us art critics. Let's say you're the arts editor at a mass magazine or daily newspaper, and you have a choice between reviewing two CDs. One combines a little Brian Eno and Pet Shop Boys with an awful lot of "sonic art" by YBA's. The other is a more regular CD by, say, the Dave Matthews Band. Obviously, you're going to have your magazine review the latter, because it's the real deal by real musicians and it's uncluttered by the gratuitous presence of a lot of parvenues from the art world. The artifact of real popular culture is going to get the coverage, and the artifact of pseudo-popular culture is going to be ignored. Why? Because the artifact of pseudo-popular culture—once you take away the snidery by which it hopes to separate itself subtly from the artifact of real popular culture, or once you take away the references by which it sucks up to real popular culture—is just an unnecessarily complicated version of an artifact of real popular culture. In other words, who needs it?

Granted, much of this state of affairs—that is, the editor's decision to ignore the artifact of pseudo-popular culture—is the fault of journalism. Almost all magazines and newspapers have been "dumbed down" over the last generation. Almost all magazines and newspapers, with the possible exception of *The New York Times* (which realizes that the aggregate avant-garde of Off-Off-Broadway theatre, the galleries in Chelsea and SoHo and the oddball dance recitals constitute a huge tourist attraction unique to New York), have cut back their coverage of serious and difficult culture in favor of increased coverage of celebrity-driven popular culture. All magazines, if not deliberately directed otherwise, gravitate to the level of *People* magazine. And that may be a charitable description of the way things are going.

But the contemporary art world shares the blame. Instead of offering something really different from popular culture, it apes it. Instead of offering a rebuttal to, say, fashion photography, it fills its galleries with bad imitations of it, kinked up with a little more S&M. Instead of offering an alternative to fey illustrations of wan, vapid show biz celebrities, it offers up paintings of wan, vapid show biz celebrities. Instead of offering sculptural objects with a

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little more gravitas than, say, tacky vases in furniture-store windows, it stuffs its galleries with allegedly wry commentaries on them in the form of, well, more tacky vases. Instead of offering a counter-example to our shallow mass culture, it caves into it and produces art that says, in effect, "See what you made me do?"

Which brings me to what contemporary art has lost along the way. Simply put, in modern art's gaining the world, contemporary art has lost its soul. O.K., that's a little strong. I'll temper it a bit: In modern art's gaining a part of the world, contemporary art has lost part of its soul. To list the most serious casualties right off, contemporary art has lost its capacities for introspection, self-criticism, and, to use the sculptor Richard Serra's term, "a crudity of initial effort."

In the old days—40, 30, even just 20 years ago—what you got when you went to an exhibition of contemporary art was an object, hanging on the wall or sitting on the floor, that wore its struggle and doubt on its sleeve, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly, and that said, in effect, "This is an example of the richness, subtlety and prickly thought you can't get in the loud, tacky, corporately produced, profit-driven world of popular culture." Their physical manifestations were usually fairly low-tech hand-made objects whose daring

lay in their abstract aesthetic ideas. These ideas emanated from the artworks like radiation from a hunk of uranium ore. And two other things emanated from them as well: struggle and angst. By struggle, I mean heartfelt revisions and more revisions plainly visible in the finished work. By angst, I mean pervading doubts plaguing the artist about whether the particular work—or even modern art itself—was really worth anything in the big picture of life on Earth.

Nowadays, what you get when you go to an exhibition of contemporary art—and I deliberately generalize and exaggerate here—is a big, spookily lighted room, with a projected video image, some carefully arranged industrial and/or commercial detritus, some "personal" mementos, some appropriated photographic images manipulated to make a social point and, often, a set of instructions about exactly how to walk through and look at the work. And much of the time, the big spooky room does not say, in effect, that here is an example of the richness, subtlety, and prickly thought you can't get in the loud, tacky world of corporately produced, profit-driven popular culture. What it does say much of the time is, here is an example of what popular culture could really do if it would just push the envelope of Quentin Tarantino, Marilyn Manson, or Beck just a little further. It says, in effect, that it's a wannabe part of the entertainment industry.

Now, I can't really prove any of the foregoing in the sense that a paper published in a scientific journal can marshal statistical evidence to prove a theory, or in the sense that a prosecutor can string together forensic evidence to convince a jury to vote unanimously to convict a perpetrator. Sweeping cultural judgements—such as mine that contemporary art is currently in a bad way—are, at bottom, inherently subjective. The only proof is history—that is, a retrospective conclusion that might eventually say, "You know, seen from where we are now, free from the hype, that period in art didn't really have much going on in it." But even the longer view is subject to revision, or revisionism. The 1970s, for instance, were seen for a long time as a fallow period in art, when things drifted off into a mediocre "pluralism" after Minimalism wore out its welcome. A lot of critics and art historians, however, are now say-

ing that the maligned decade was actually the era of the last real morphological revolution in art, when artists like Bruce Nauman and Joseph Beuys were at their peak. So, I suppose, it's entirely possible that when critics and art historians look back at our current moment in art, what looks to me like a time filled to overflow with philosophes-manqués and whiny, over-strategic show biz wannabe slacker artists, they'll see treasures that I don't. More power to them, because, if I'm still around, I'll desperately want somebody to put me out of my. . .er, frenzy.