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## Introduction

### Dilemmas of Professional Culture

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The art world [is] such a funny place because it[’s] like a big balloon: You push real hard and it’s flexible and elastic and resilient; so you push and push and push, and all of a sudden it goes—schwo. It takes you inside, and you can’t get out.

—Edward Kienholz

We are told that the art produced in the Bay Area is of nationwide importance and interest. Sometimes we are even told that it has international import. We, of course, think that it is all important just because it is ours.

—Fred Martin, circa 1960

In a passionate, often angry article published in 1963 in *Artforum*, a new journal dedicated to critical discussion of West Coast art, painter Fred Martin expressed his outrage at the conception of art history embodied in recent exhibition programs at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the nation’s oldest modern art museum west of Manhattan.<sup>1</sup> He viewed the priorities of the museum’s new director, George Culler, as fundamentally hostile to the concerns motivating most contemporary work in the San Francisco Bay Area. Juxtaposing two recent shows at the museum, “Art of the Bay Area” and “Art of Brazil,” Martin questioned the museum’s assumption that modern artists in all parts of the world could be interesting only to the degree that they worked on problems highlighted in Paris before 1940 or in New York afterward. The museum’s staff had reinforced a division of the world into peripheries and centers. The work of the Brazilian painters selected for the show fit comfortably into metropolitan ideas of the tropics. The companion show revealed that a similar process was well under way with California art, whose lively local art scenes had only recently captured the attention of New York galleries and museums. The museum favored work, Martin thought, that repack-

aged trends already established in New York but with flourishes that provided references to sun, surf, deserts, mountains, suburban sprawl, or bohemian rebellion, icons that distilled East Coast conceptions of life on the West Coast. The two shows demonstrated that Bay Area and Brazilian art had been made provincial. Provincial art was "the voice of the Western world," Martin observed, actually present in the work exhibited, "talking about what its own voice sounds like to it" (48).

The curatorial perspective, Martin insisted, denied the citizens of Brazil, or for that matter the residents of the Bay Area, their own intrinsic interests, activities, and forms of self-exploration consonant with their unique histories. Modern art had therefore become a vehicle for dissociating people from their world, from their experiences, from the "sheer sensuous perceiving of the Bay Area as a place" (47). To develop original work with concerns and problematics distinct from those affirmed in the center was to enter a zone of frustration and failure. Works from the provinces that refused to make their starting point ideas that were already dominant in the center appeared confused, parochial, provincial, eccentric.

Martin's argument took for granted that modern art in California had an independent history, grounded in the historical and natural peculiarities of the state. That the major regional museum no longer supported continued development of problems and approaches that had been particularly important to artists working in the state during the previous half century was puzzling to him, for it meant that the museum's leadership assumed that their most important public consisted of curators and critics in New York rather than people interested in art from their own communities. Martin concluded that regional artists would have to search for other venues to reach the broader publics they hoped might respond to their work. A living culture required continuous collaboration between artists and a public that was not afraid to speak back, a public that had rejected the passive, receptive relationship to exhibited work expected from admissions-paying museum audiences. If they failed, modern art would die.

Martin's argument improvised on core beliefs underlying the emergence and development of modern art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like sexuality, creative imagination was a natural force embedded within the body. A vision of "modern art" as an ongoing conversation between equals sharing their "sensuous experiences" of necessity challenged the establishment of fixed collective norms. The truths artists could bring to the surface were felt physically in the experience of the work they created. The more powerful the work, the more it could transform how its public looked at the world around them and bring them to understand the transience of contemporary social arrange-

ments. Even if his interests were only indirectly political, his faith in the power of art to reveal truths convention had long obscured allowed Martin to make several telling observations about the relationship of art to structures of power in U.S. society and the negative effects of U.S. cultural power upon other societies in the world. The questions he raised others soon extended with even greater vehemence to long-standing inequalities within California's art communities as artists who were female, gay, or from communities of color insisted that their work was essential for the people of the United States to grasp how race, gender, and sexuality had shaped the lives of everyone in the country.

In a previous book, I explored the role of modernist aesthetic ideas in California in providing a discursive resource for criticizing mid-twentieth-century U.S. society.<sup>2</sup> Poets and artists provided a range of images that influenced discussions of the cold war, the Indochina wars, the environment, sexual politics, capital punishment, racism, and poverty. In this study, I return to the politics of modern art as it developed within California to focus on a different question: how a growing "arts community" developed a professionalized identity along with institutional structures that could set priorities and efficiently manage arts training, production, exhibition, and publicity. *Politics* in this context is understood as an unending contest within institutions and organizations over how best to ensure the resources needed to support a wide range of activities, only some of which artists do.

Every arts organization makes determinations about what questions it views as most important for contemporary practice, which approaches provide the most interesting departures, and consequently which artists and movements it promotes at any given moment. In peripheral locations like California in the mid-twentieth century where resources were often exceptionally limited, choices frequently generated protests against the inherent limitations of the criteria used, a challenge that intensified as artists, curators, and critics from marginalized social groups worked to break the barriers preventing their full participation in the profession. Even if a goal of modern art practice has been to provide critical examinations of contemporary experience, the conditions of institutional reproduction pointed in contrary directions. An alternative history of modern art might therefore focus on the successive contests to force recognition for new bodies of work whose absence called into question the very legitimacy of art as a distinctive form of knowledge.

The growth of art as a force able to influence the public has depended on the consolidation of defined knowledge practices into well-organized, hierarchical institutions with the power to determine what issues are most important to explore and whose work best defines the

advances made in any field. Martin Heidegger suggested that the modern era commenced with a concern to test received traditions against accurate representation of the observed world.<sup>3</sup> A rigorous intellectual discipline with standards for evaluating claims, assigning worth to a contribution, and fixing “truth” had to develop if the images of the world the modern sciences developed were to be trusted as more than fanciful speculation. Yet the quest for truth required freedom as well as discipline if inaccurate first principles were to be exposed as false and replaced with images resting on more substantial truth claims. When Immanuel Kant tried to define what distinguished modern thought, he emphasized the autonomy that investigation had gained: “to use one’s own understanding instead of being guided by others.”<sup>4</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel extended this line of thought to declare freedom of subjectivity as the defining feature of the modern world.<sup>5</sup>

During the development through the nineteenth century of what would eventually be called “modern art,” artistic practice found its niche as an autonomous form of knowledge by taking subjectivity as the special domain of the arts. The visual arts shifted from representation of already established beliefs and values to presenting the “truth” of the world as a trace left on the human spirit.<sup>6</sup> Work as an expression of genuine inner vision must, by definition, be arbitrary, but it also creates an opportunity, if the means of communication are in fact becoming more widely available, for a meeting of experiences, as if in dialogue. At the end of the nineteenth century, aesthetic perspectives on subjective truth paralleled findings emerging from the new science of psychology. William James argued that the study of how consciousness formed required a pluralistic theory of truth. James turned to the etymological roots of consciousness, literally “knowing with,” to picture thought operations as relationships between the observer and observed that were fluid and contingent. He noted that “Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. . . . However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective center or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.”<sup>7</sup>

James argued that irreducible pluralism marks the law of consciousness. Not only would different observers see the same thing differently depending on their backgrounds and purposes, but the same observer might well have different perceptions at different times because, at every stage of a thought process, the mind is “a theater of simultaneous possibilities.”<sup>8</sup> Without a continuous sharing of a wide range of experiences, any of which are inherently limited in some critical manner no matter how rigorous the process by which they emerged, no truth could emerge

that was sufficiently comprehensive enough to guide human action with certainty that the end results would predictably be what people desired.

In the arts, testing the range of differences in how aspects of the world might be perceived became the object for experimental study. As a result, artists and critics could claim that the work of the artist was actually a form of knowledge, not a technique for representation of images the validity of which was established elsewhere. The form was the content, for the constructive process through which an artwork emerged revealed *thought in action*. Knowledge need not be limited to testable propositions the meaning of which had to be fixed, as required in the sciences and engineering. This breakthrough, a common feature in twentieth-century avant-garde artistic practice, shattered the idea that interpretative communities must involve a set of common meanings codified in a canon of accepted masterpieces. If members of a society in fact had a common standard for looking at the world, there would be no need for them to communicate with each other, as interaction would naturally proceed from full, transcendent communion. Community implies conflict of perspectives, and therefore, community also involves a practical need to reach out and include the experiences of those we do not understand. The arts became a practice in which the exploration of differences in the imagination of the world could be institutionalized.<sup>9</sup>

Arts organizations, whether located in schools, museums, galleries, periodicals, or elsewhere, form an interlocking set of complicated and expensive activities whose practical dynamics at any given time set the terms of what types of work will be deemed most interesting and valuable. Production and dissemination of art require consistency and reproducibility. There will be variations at every step, but predictability and planning predominate over improvisation to define a system that can train students, mount exhibitions, sell work, and reflect on what all the activity might signify. Materials have to be produced on a regularized basis suitable for the object’s intended use. Design and production personnel have to be trained in specialized skills. For objects to be produced at an efficient and regular rate timed to satisfy demand, most activities must be standardized to take best advantage of equipment that is often expensive and useful only for limited tasks. These requirements grow even more intense when innovation is a demand of the system since the personnel and the organizations must be able to handle a greater range of possibilities while still meeting the deadlines teaching, exhibition, and publication schedules impose.

Reproducibility is a key feature of what makes an innovation something that holds, something that can be recognized as an innovation worthy of further development.<sup>10</sup> For the individual craftsperson, this is

a question of economic and moral support that provides enough material reward and psychic motivation to keep at it. For each generation struggling to establish their own vision and leadership, reproducibility involves setting forth a defined set of questions that can be worked on over their lifetimes. Viewed from the point of view of reproducibility, an individual work is only one element in a process of forming and developing that gives meaning to every minute of a life focused by an institution. For entrepreneurs within the field, especially, the process, keeping the game in perpetual motion, transcends any single result. Reproducibility of the institution requires its being able to attract resources to be allocated to individuals on a regular, predictable basis and mechanisms for determining who gets those resources and for what projects.

Since producing objects involves the organization of considerable resources, both labor and material, completed artwork presents a history of socially expressed desires that depend upon the mundane requirements of keeping museums, galleries, and public space filled on a regular schedule. More valued objects receive more regular resources, assisting continued production and flow into exhibition. The exclusionary process based on what objects best fit the needs of exhibitors has created a hierarchy of values, which in turn has demanded the investment of literary resources to justify and refine standards. That activity developed into the fields of aesthetics, criticism, and art history, the practitioners of which, however, on understanding the general terms of their own labor can (and frequently do) step back from a primary focus on fine art to consider a broader range of material production.

Effective activity fulfills a continuing flow of deadlines, filling both galleries and printed material with relevant content. Replicable activity requires principles that provide meaning to deeds that are often repetitive. Wlad Godzich has noted, "An institution is first and foremost a guiding idea, the idea of some determined goal to be reached for the common weal. . . . The members of the group are shaped by the guiding idea they seek to implement and the procedures they apply."<sup>11</sup> The principle of reproducibility extends as well to personnel, whose privileges, whatever they might be given particular responsibilities and position, are based on knowledge claims that are simultaneously intellectual and technical.

Their ability to reproduce the validity of their collective expertise is an important factor in the reproduction of social taste. Reception involves a struggle for resources that will determine the ability of particular groups to continue reproducing particular forms and the experiences they foster. Within this framework, the artist is a skilled craftsman competent in relevant production processes. His or her talent lies in achieving consistent effects that are pleasing and desirable to others, first and fore-

most museum and gallery leadership, collectors, and critics, all of whom must explain why a particular artist's work is worth the effort *they* have invested. As George Kubler put it, "genius" might be better defined as a unity of disposition and situation that allows for group productivity rather than as an innate spiritual or psychological state inherent to a remarkable individual.<sup>12</sup> For a young artist to speak of her career is to speak of a potential in the process of unfolding. When she (or he) becomes a mature artist, her career is bounded by what she has actually produced. A mature career is a sign of the collective recognition she has achieved. To imagine its weight is to determine the value that others, not the painter herself, have found in the work. Professional ego begins with the internalization of the judgment of others. In a field such as art building on a long legacy of practice and theory, the judgment of others who live long after one's death looms as the ultimate arbiter, the only power capable of reversing the decisions of one's contemporaries.

The underlying habitual aspects of production and reception establish relationships of content and form. Meaning is an important element in many art objects, but still only one of several subsystems involved in fabrication. Ideology takes material form only secondarily as explicit ideas. The more important manifestations of social values within art are often unthematized propositions about how to fit experiences together into a structured sense of relationship that has been called a *habitus*. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that for many, though not all, communicative cases, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."<sup>13</sup> In constructive activities, such as art, meaning is inseparable from form and crafting and there is no paraphrase possible. Meaning is built into the structure of the object as an object, that is, as something to be sensually experienced, though the ability to exchange objects implies a whole way of living together because the practices of production, distribution, and reception are such that they cannot exist for a single occasion or situation.<sup>14</sup> Objects reveal forms of expression that bid their users to see, to touch, to feel, and to occupy space in specific and replicable ways. The propositions rendered through objects provide an effect considerably different from systems of explanation or intellectual references. When objects are valued, they transform the sensory habits of the body and create ways for responding to the world that can function without being thought about consciously. For professionals to be able to work on a regular basis, they must create a public that is itself as predictable and reproducible as every other component in the process. The subjective repertoire, a "sense" of self (*sense* understood as simultaneously meaning and feeling), that initiated publics seek out safeguards every other organizational element, including the subjective repertoires of artists, curators, and critics.

The problematic of how to organize modern (later “contemporary”) arts institutions that can be self-sustaining has been a challenge in every part of the world, although the specifics vary from place to place. California has long been a hub of U.S. and global cultural life, but, curiously, it has also been remarkably provincial and isolated. The state, often proclaimed by its leaders to be as much a “nation” as a political subdivision of the United States,<sup>15</sup> provides an interesting, though certainly not unique, example of a provincial society developing cultural ambitions that include the desire to become a center for the production of art that captures the modern condition. California as a focus for this investigation has the advantage of not being at the center of contemporary art, even if during the twentieth century the state developed into an important site for production and exhibition. It has historically been a province, afflicted with underdeveloped cultural institutions typical for societies colonized initially as resource-extraction zones, where fortunes were made by exporting raw materials to other locations.

And yet it has long been more than that, for the state early developed an exemplary commitment to higher education that proved important to its development as one of the preeminent centers for scientific research and new technology development in the world. An expansive conception of education, together with the location of the motion picture industry in Hollywood in the 1910s, offered the conditions for unusually rapid expansion of the fine arts, at least on the creative side. Institutional support, however, lagged, creating an environment in which artists had to form their own networks to support their ambitions. Artists were often at odds with the state’s cultural institutions, and the bitter criticisms found in the historical record were typically aimed at stimulating development. With a history that combines features of both core and periphery, California provides an unusual perspective for studying the relationship of economic development, social opportunity, and cultural expression, a perspective with implications for the future of international cultural exchange. Does the rapid growth of art in California and a modicum of success on the international stage simply mean that the leaders of another metropolitan center have successfully established a place of privilege for themselves within an inherently hierarchical world? Or might the California story exemplify instead a step toward the development of a more egalitarian world in which cultural activity and authority are broadly dispersed in a global network linking communities wherever there are people who want to contribute?

The historical record suggests that the second possibility is utopian rather than realistic. At least as the story has been told to date, modern cultural innovation spread from a handful of centers to the rest of the

world. Chapter 1 therefore precedes developments in California with events in Paris, France, the most important center for new artistic ideas and practices in the nineteenth century. I examine the broader implications of French ideas on modern art through the writings of Hippolyte Taine and Georges Clemenceau. In 1864, Taine helped launch curricular reforms at the *École des Beaux Arts*, the most prominent art academy in the world at the time. His explanation of “modern” painting proposed that art was an autonomous form of knowledge with distinctive contributions to make to contemporary society. Clemenceau further developed these principles using the work of impressionist master Claude Monet to define how experimental painting expressed the ethos of modern democracy. In Chapter 2, I sketch the movement of these ideas west to the United States. Artists throughout the country, including California, traveled to Paris to get a “scientific” education in modern art. By the beginning of the twentieth century, those ideas were being adapted to the U.S. educational system. If this was a national development, the lack of a centralized art market or art press in the first decades of the twentieth century meant that painting in the United States was still marked by strong regional schools, and the Americanization of modern art followed different paths in different sections of the country. The discussion of what may have been distinctive, though probably not unique, about the California modern tradition hinges around the figure of Sam Rodia (1878–1965), architect and builder of the Watts Towers. For many mid-twentieth-century artists living and working in the state, Rodia was the quintessential California modern artist, a position that this book adopts although for dramatically different reasons. Given that the story of modernism in the Americas is usually told as one of transmission westward, the argument stresses that even if Rodia came to the United States from across the Atlantic, he discovered the principles of modern artistic expression as he engaged the life and values of his new home, a factor not uncommon with other immigrant artists such as Joseph Stella, Knud Merrild, or Willem de Kooning, but indisputable in Rodia’s case given his absolute lack of formal art training.

Chapter 3 focuses on two important characteristics of California society as it developed between 1850 and 1950: the state’s relatively high number of residents enrolling in colleges and universities and the relatively prominent place that women played in the development of new cultural institutions. Underlying the social experiments of “universal higher education” and new conceptions of proper gender roles were cultural shifts that promoted ambitious ideas about culture and its role in modern society. Chapter 4 explores the implications of the intersection of these developments in the early work of a mid-twentieth-century abstract painter, Jay DeFeo (1929–1989). With ambitious ideas and

unquestioned technical mastery, she developed an austere but spectacular sculptural style that attracted national and international attention. A particularly talented product of the state's commitment to widespread university education, she began her career when the surest form of support for contemporary painters came from artist cooperative galleries, which provided both community and sites for exhibition. The intellectual independence coop galleries provided, however, locked artists into a preprofessional situation and limited how effectively California artists could perform on a national stage. As Chapter 5 argues, this disjunction grew wider with the shift in attitudes and practices associated with the "postmodern." The continuing growth of art programs within higher education however provided a stable alternative path to professionalization. Humanistic education proved better able to support a broader range of work than either local galleries, which were usually short-lived, or the more prestigious system of publicity and commerce centered in the museums and commercial galleries of Manhattan. Indeed the academy has been a foundational pillar of contemporary art as understood today at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The growing dependence of art on higher education is particularly clear in California because the state has been the nation's unquestioned leader in expanding access to universities and colleges.

Chapter 6 discusses the development of the assemblage movement in the state after 1945. Artists after World War II increasingly began to think of artistic practice in terms of constructing objects rather than image composition. In this regard, the example Sam Rodia provided with his towers in Watts proved particularly attractive to many California-based artists, and assemblage art, centered on the use of found objects, either fabricated or natural, was widely practiced in the state from the 1940s to the 1980s as artists developed a newer postmodern understanding of who they were and how their work could contribute to better understanding contemporary life. The styles and subjects of assemblagists were diverse, but critics at the time understood that work in the genre shared a need to comment on life in the United States, to break down boundaries between subject and object, reality and fantasy, life and art, literature and the visual arts. Unlike comparable work in New York, where objects incorporated into art had been selected more for the formal possibilities they offered, assemblage in California was primarily an art with content.

I link this effort to expand expressive potential by expanding the media appropriate to use for the production of art objects to one artist's campaign to go beyond the limitations of contemporary art practice that had developed during a process of professionalization and institutional growth. Chapter 7 reviews the work and ideas of Noah Purifoy (1917–

2004), one of the most influential African American assemblagists to have worked in the state. He served as founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, where he used his position to formalize a people- and community-based approach to art that he thought would be more relevant to the needs of the African American community. In the process, he worked to define and refine the values he believed to have been the essence of Sam Rodia's legacy. Purifoy devoted much of his professional life, including eleven years working at the California Arts Council, to establishing an institutional basis that could complement, and as necessary counter, the centering of professional practice in the visual arts in art schools, museums, and commercial galleries. His career was marked by a valiant effort to develop community-based art into a secure institutional niche that could complement both commercial galleries and educational institutions and in the process redirect artists back to the challenge of addressing their work to a larger, uninitiated community, that is to a public that was not necessarily already initiated into the professional practice of art as a knowledge-based discipline.

The ideals that Rodia, DeFeo, and Purifoy articulated and exemplified proved (and remain) compelling to many artists precisely because they provided models for intellectual and moral independence. Each stood somewhat outside the trajectory of institutional realities and thus each in effect offered a critique of how culture was being organized in the state during the twentieth century. Sam Rodia relied on property rights and willpower to reach out to strangers passing by his home with his vision of a reconfigured city that must have seemed wondrous to some and simply weird to many others. Emerging out of the working population, he had no connection to the networks of modern artists who might have supported him, provided that an artist with no formal training could find a common language with those well versed in the traditions they wanted to join. Jay DeFeo entered the professional world twenty years later. She was quickly part of a network, or "community," of artists, friends, and critics, but the ad hoc activities could not provide stable support. To survive, she had to professionalize into the institutions that actually had resources, and she became a teacher in a local college. From that basis, other aspects of her professional career fell into place, and the ambitious ideas that had made her interesting as an emerging artist were contained within a replicable situation. Noah Purifoy entered the professional world twenty years after DeFeo when he committed himself to building a black arts movement. He moved within a large multiracial network of artists, but the institutions he faced had limited room for artists of his background or his concerns. He spent much of his life striving for a more open and pluralized profession with the capacity to sustain a broader variety of participants. Purifoy battled a

form of social production that was alienating to him with alternative ways of working, not with criticism alone, not even primarily with criticism. He understood that there had to be structures available for alternative ideas to provide patterns of reproducibility.

The democratization of cultural legacies inherited from aristocratic societies with well-defined beliefs in the superiority of patrons gifted with good taste and of genius artists miraculously able to articulate humanity's highest ideals has depended upon an uneven but continuous expansion of who is able to express their ideas about the world they have inherited. The struggle to develop a public culture that promotes communication rather than marginalization or division is today an important aspect of much contemporary art. Chapter 8 examines current interests in "borderlands" art and the role that plastic artists in both Californias (U.S. and Mexican) have assumed in dissecting the different cultural meanings surrounding the international border dividing societies that have been closely integrated for more than two centuries. Border art provides an excellent, but in no way unique, example of how intensification of formal techniques strengthened explicitly political statements by artists who felt equally passionate about their craft and about the world in which they lived.

With the border as with other issues, Californians relatively early experienced social realities that later became broadly typical of contemporary life in most wealthy nations: expansion of higher education, broader participation of women in social and cultural life, development of a knowledge-based economy, relatively fluid social mobility accompanied by the continuation of racial hierarchies, broad racial and cultural diversity as a result of global labor migrations. Likewise, the dynamic linking of inclusion and exclusion in the development of the state's cultural life provides an excellent example of unresolved tensions found elsewhere as well. The success of California in overcoming its provincial origins as a site for resource extraction suggests that a model of the world divided between a few cosmopolitan centers surrounded by layers of increasingly backward hinterlands might someday be replaced by one in which talents and resources are widely dispersed across the world in overlapping networks of shared concerns and projects. The outlines of a culture consistent with that possible but still uncertain future might be discerned in the struggles narrated in this book to expand the voices and the visions able to contribute.

Older artists, who can remember the days when schools, museums, and magazines all operated on a smaller, more intimate scale, often speak nostalgically of when art was a "community," when the only people in museum galleries would be other artists and every show felt like a family affair. Institutional growth inevitably has fostered depersonaliza-

tion. It has increased the power in the hands of curators, who demonstrate their professional status as historians and critics through the exhibits they organize. Increased funding and expenses has also increased the power of trustees, typically wealthy patrons with an amateur's love for modern or contemporary art. Trustees often defer to the judgment of directors and curators on specifically art-historical questions, but their personal, occasionally idiosyncratic, enthusiasms for specific artists or types of work remain a factor in what museums exhibit and acquire.

Democratic access and professional standards need not be antagonistic, even if in most local situations their negotiation has been difficult. The more highly developed art organizations are, the better they support both artists and their publics. Well-developed arts institutions have resources to provide artists adequate time for their work. Collective discussion deepens the questions with which artists grapple and provides a more sophisticated theoretical framework for how they pose and execute their work, leading to new efforts that more precisely intervene in the most puzzling and troubling questions of the day, the challenges that irritate most and therefore are deeply in need of imaginative release. By the end of the twentieth century, the plastic arts had become an integral part of intellectual life in the United States, as well as most other countries. Despite more challenging work being presented to the public, attendance at museums focused on modern and contemporary art has grown dramatically.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art reported approximately 300,000 annual visitors. In 2004, annual attendance had jumped to nearly 775,000. Membership in the museum increased from 13,000 in 1991 to 57,000 in 2004.<sup>16</sup> The scale of increase is not unusual—comparable growth occurred at similar institutions across the country and around the world. Some contemporary art exhibits draw impressive numbers of visitors, as in 2003 when Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*, a series of installations inciting meditation on weather's role in cultural geography in general and on global warming in particular, attracted a "blockbusting" two million people to the Tate Modern in London.<sup>17</sup> Audience surveys done for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art indicate that their public has a higher than average rate of college education, and growth during the second half of the twentieth century in professional employment requiring advanced degrees partially explains why museum attendance has steadily grown since World War II. So does the expansion of trans- and intercontinental tourism. Undoubtedly, many reasons have been at play, not the least of which has been an increased ability of art organizations to publicize their activities, to ascertain what different publics might be interested in

viewing, and then to employ the staff needed to make a visit comfortable, informative, efficient, and hopefully thought-provoking.

The inclusive and exclusive sides of modern and contemporary art practice have long existed in tension. The issues of whose work is exhibited, what range of content is allowed, and what are acceptable frameworks for discussing new work have a long and contentious history. Those on the outside have had to challenge reigning standards by raising questions about *who* determines what is important about art, *whose* aesthetic becomes normative, and *whose* interests have benefited financially, institutionally, and ideologically from that aesthetic. The introduction of new participants into an institution has not changed these basic questions but it has increased the perspectives included in the debates and made the process of negotiating a range of outcomes both more complicated and potentially more responsive to a broader range of society.

Since economic and aesthetic issues are not separable, the examination in this book continuously moves between art, intellectual, and social history in order to reveal the correlation of overlapping sets of social relations and the subjective horizons they provided for artists responding to the complex set of opportunities and limitations they found as they tried to craft work meaningful to others. The study does not provide a comprehensive account of major figures, movements, and tendencies in modern and contemporary art. The episodes presented allow for a discussion of the historical relation of artists, the institutions that support the practice of art, and the public. Following the course of nearly 150 years, the chapters explore the intellectual and practical conditions shaping the formation of artists' goals for their work; contesting ideas over art as a form of knowledge; the relationship between the expansion of institutional support for visual art and efforts to purify media of extraneous influences; factors promoting the pluralism that has marked artistic practice since the 1970s; the emergence of new media that overturned the supremacy once given to image making as the defining aspect of studio art; and the relationship of manual and performative knowledge at play in the art objects themselves to the cognitive knowledge that governs critical evaluation. An argument about the larger implications of expanding the roles artists and their work have played in modern U.S. life emerges from the juxtaposition of the social, institutional, and subjective domains drawn from a history of mid-twentieth-century cultural shifts, some of which took material form in paintings, assemblage constructions, and performance art; others in the decisions people made about the most intimate aspects of their lives; and still others, perhaps the most important, in developing institutional

structures in higher education, museums, and community-based arts programs.

Each of the levels I treat is distinct if overlapping. Their interrelations are not causative, though it is unlikely that changes in one are without "resonances" (what might sometimes be described as "effects") in other domains. Each change, regardless of domain, can be viewed as "syllables" of social relationships given that no domain is ever experienced in isolation. Syllables are by definition fragments, simple and repeatable and possessing the potential of combining into increasingly complex statements, sometimes so complex that they approach a state of indecipherability. The act of faith is the assertion of a grammar that transforms an isolated event into a "syllable" of visual vocabulary, economic expectations, or family relations; that is, into a fragment of a larger whole that is always imaginary but nonetheless demonstrably real.

How could there be any single history of any phenomenon without in effect isolating one fragment as determinant of the complex? While language grows from structures that facilitate the exchange of meanings, language is also always an ongoing performance in which variations continually emerge. Given that we communicate through relatively limited systems, any given expression has a high likelihood of falling short in conveying what the speaker hopes to communicate. Another variation is tried, an effort to short-circuit the limitations inherent to all forms of expression, whether speech, images, gestures. The plastic arts have remained important because they escape the particular limitations of verbal languages to convey more direct sensory experiences that, if successful, stimulate further efforts to throw off the experience into words that themselves, however deficient or limited, might miraculously bring into focus aspects of contemporary life otherwise stuck in the realm of ineffable feelings.



## Conclusion

### Improvising from the Margins

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How often, when probing what is on the fringes of a given problem, do we discover the most useful keys for dealing with the problem itself.

—Manfredo Tafuri

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the San Francisco Bay Area had only a handful of places regularly showing modern art. At the beginning of 2009, publics with an interest in art had more than 250 possible venues, offering highly diverse programs with distinctive approaches to contemporary art practices.<sup>1</sup> Three new museums were in the planning stage, while both the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Berkeley Art Museum were launching capital campaigns to expand gallery space for special exhibits and more regular display of sizable and growing permanent collections. Similar growth occurred somewhat earlier in Los Angeles, and a long-standing competition between the leaders of the two major metropolitan centers in the state has probably helped spur ambitious projects in the Bay Area. Expansion of art programming is found throughout the state, particularly in the fast-growing cities of San Diego and San José, but also in much smaller towns like Santa Barbara, Sacramento, Monterey, Santa Rosa, and Fresno. Open studio programs operate in every part of the state, as contemporary art has become an element in the tourism economy of the state. County and city governments have been supportive of arts programs, often using hotel taxes and public art set-aside requirements for large-scale commercial developments, to provide a financial base relatively more secure than grants to activity viewed as both economically and culturally significant. Beyond government support, the growth and increased stability of California's cultural institutions have come through impressive dona-

tions of money and time from the state's business and social leadership. Deciding on the right balance of regional and more internationally recognized work has long been a subject for tense debate for all institutions that have made contemporary art a regular part of their programming. At times disputes over how best to balance the variety of responsibilities has sundered boards of trustees with opposing priorities. The experience of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art suggests that as the stature of an organization grows, programming balance shifts away from local experimentation toward work with recognized international value. Local artists continue to echo Fred Martin's complaint in 1963 that the museum does not give high enough priority to them. However, given the increased prestige that the museum has gained over the past four decades, when its curators do decide to mount an exhibit of a local artist, a broader, more international professional public will take note of the work. At the same time, dozens of other venues have opened that focus on exhibition of different types of local work. Weak to nonexistent institutional infrastructure is no longer one of the many problems artists face as they develop their careers.

The stories in the previous chapters suggest the difficulty of the process by which artists in the state developed a distinctive regional culture that inevitably reflected the ambiguities of their own social position. As important as the growth of museums, schools, and government arts programs has been, the growth of a culture in which contemporary art occupies a valued place is primarily the result of men and women imagining that it would be a good thing, both personally and for others, if they spent their lives practicing art. California cultural life took its particular shape as members of marginalized groups staked their claim to interpret modern life. They saw themselves helping develop a new type of art community that, like the University of California, the state's preeminent cultural institution, could be simultaneously democratic and rigorous.

Sam Rodia proved to be the quintessential California modern artist because he provided an exemplary model for transcending the dual challenge of personal marginality and regional provinciality. He created a work that was original even though the resources available to support his project were virtually nonexistent. Each of his limitations, whether of materials, real estate, finances, or his own education, passed through his creative imagination to become a positive element strengthening his statement. Because he had no fine arts training, preexisting standards of excellence did not constrain him, nor did the widely shared desires in the first half of the twentieth century to translate to the shores of California phantasmagorical images of an idealized Mediterranean heritage. He responded to the messy social conditions of his time with a single site-specific work that he clearly hoped would attract the attention and

approval of others. Rodia provided a model for cultural production no longer defined through a subordinate relationship to imaginary cultural capitals whose distance always marked the inadequacy of one's own immediate situation.<sup>2</sup>

As local arts communities grew rapidly after World War II and evidence of a distinctive regional culture gained the attention of national and international observers, the question still remained of how regional activity connected to what artists in other parts of the world were doing at the same time. If modern art was in fact a global movement aimed at freeing sensation and perception from social conventions, the new culture California artists developed needed to include an imaginary of both present and past, of distant colleagues with whom one's work was in dialogue. This was the challenge that Jay DeFeo, product of an ambitious experiment in public education, undertook. She had to be "funky" because improvisatory use of rough-hewn materials expressed the expansive, if rough-and-tumble, society that had identified her as a woman whose talent ought to be nurtured instead of suppressed. The professional and subjective paths she and her peers followed inevitably were improvised, for there were simply no models to imitate. Her embrace of a "classicizing" approach to composition and work method provided a mental structure within which to think innovatively as well as a relationship to a shared heritage that might help make the model her generation was developing readable to people in other places and times. The connection would be meaningful only to the degree that she could build upon the legacies she had inherited, to the degree that her work made understanding of one's heritage real and relevant for contemporary life. In the process, the large-scale ambitions that marked her work and that of many of her peers provided a basis for becoming full professionals whose intellectual and technical accomplishment ought to be of interest to anyone anywhere in the world.

Like DeFeo, Noah Purifoy worked with both modern and classic aesthetics in mind, but as he struggled to develop the relevance of contemporary art for the African American community, he confronted the question of how publics for art form and then are reproduced. If artists were to work toward the utopian ideal that an emotionally and sensationally intense physical experience can transform, or "refresh," to use Hippolyte Taine's terminology, how people look at their world, their work is important for the broadest possible public. However, given that complex organizations need to manage resources in predictable ways, arts institutions required much more limited publics whose appreciation could predictably sustain both daily operations and a manageable level of growth. The democratic ideals that had made Purifoy a professional artist who imagined his craft probing the contradictions of contempo-

rary life were in conflict with the organizational needs of his occupation. As the institution of art consolidated, modern ideals of art practice as a form of knowledge gave way to postmodern conceptions of art as self-authorizing, self-justifying practices. Purifoy started with an assumption that art practice could, and should, be conceived as a form of research, but results could be applied to a much wider range of social situations than had developed in contemporary museums or university art departments. To escape what he imagined as the golden cage of professionalism, he pursued a strategy of state-funded programs expanding the range of sustainable artist-public relations. His efforts were successful on their own terms but could not overturn the hierarchy that assigned lower worth and hence fewer resources to work produced in community-based situations. He also discovered that he could not be both an arts administrator and an artist. As an administrator, he could create new conditions for the building of contemporary culture, but only as an artist could he actually contribute to that culture.

Efforts on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border to make art practice an important part of the understanding of border life demonstrate that the configuration of artist-public relations shapes what can be said effectively, who artists reach, and how work is received and interpreted. For practicing contemporary artists, regardless of the specific topics that they address or the methods with which they work, the incomplete, always contingent nature of professional autonomy remains a force driving improvisation and, on occasion, genuine innovation. The experiences of the artists examined in this book remain instructive for the different paths taken as the United States has developed a more diverse and inclusive culture. Questions of access and inclusion remain intensely contentious in part because participation in the professional art world by women or people of color remains the most limited at the most prestigious sites. The persistence of inequalities is particularly evident in one critical marker of success in the contemporary art world, the sales price an artist's work fetches, but their effects can be seen in other indicators of professional recognition such as the prestige of the museum where one exhibits or the ranking of the school where one teaches.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the ability to create work that can reach a broader public and generate comment has widened dramatically. The pace of inclusion quickened after the 1960s, but the process itself goes more deeply into the past, suggesting that long-term trends are inclusive rather than exclusionary even if each step has been the occasion of bitter, often violent confrontation, as well as continuing frustration for many of the people involved. Underlying the development of modern, postmodern, and contemporary art has been a continuous battle of those from groups long excluded from intellectual work to insist that

their perspectives are indispensable in the shaping of a more equitable and realistic common culture.

Inclusion of more diverse participants in arts practice has accompanied and deepened the development of a more critical, a more contested culture. Contemporary art presents the contradictions of the contemporary world with a directness that would have surprised most modernist painters, many of whom strove to create an algebra for the translation of individual into intersubjective experience that could be shared in a manner that put apparently contradictory sensations into harmony with each other. Contemporary art has largely abandoned all ideas of harmony and resolution. The work is often difficult to absorb and grasp given the specialized practices and discourses that have developed around the construction and reception of aesthetic objects. Even if contemporary art has become more inclusive and, to that degree, consistent with the nation's ostensible democratic ideals, the practice of art has grown more complex and professionalized, more subject to formal constraints governing what work is shown and how it is discussed. Art is, and perhaps should remain, a discipline that works with forms, objects, processes, and ideas that are often difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend. In compensation, the alienation from routine ways of discussing well-known problems *may* stimulate an entirely new way of looking at a topic once a viewer has overcome the challenge of the unfamiliar. There are no guarantees, and indeed most work probably fails, but that is the gamble that both artist and public take. The question for society has been whether anybody can be initiated who is willing to make the effort.

The relationship of art to its potential publics remains a complicated question in a society where education has become a central foundation of privilege and power. The ability of a discipline to function as a social force rests on the ability of its practitioners to assert the autonomy of their work from the judgment of those external to the field. Work cannot be overly accessible if its justification is to expose and challenge conventional ways of perceiving and feeling. Estrangement generates a particular creative approach that requires unusual levels of critical judgment to absorb intelligently. Curators and critics have become the first, and to some degree, core public for contemporary art precisely because their training and work experience help them evaluate new work and determine what should be brought to the attention of other, less involved publics. They occupy a position comparable to peer reviewers in the sciences. Their judgments have practical effects for what is shown and discussed, as well as what is bought, but given the large number of organizations involved in exhibiting and interpreting contemporary art, the opinions curators and critics form are in no way homogeneous.

Despite the impossibility of a unanimous opinion on almost any question, the intensity of debate and discussion underscores the important role of expertise in the current configuration of contemporary art.

Artists and others who think that an artwork could, or ought to, communicate directly with a broader public must confront the paucity of support available for alternative practices. In that sense, they find themselves in a position comparable to their predecessors in provincial places like California before the boom in the visual arts of the 1960s. Improvisatory strategies developed for a cultural environment that assumed value lay elsewhere remain relevant to contemporary practice, even if the "elsewhere" whose authority must be confronted has shifted to structures that are inherent to the professional standards that, in principle, protect and expand the ability of all artists to work as freely and as deeply as they can. Aesthetic autonomy has been a precondition for being able to make statements about the contemporary world that are not already predetermined by political ideology. Yet by the same token, if free expression is a necessary precondition for any artist to make an original contribution, every generation of emergent artists confronts an inherent, existential challenge of learning how to break away from the institutional requirements particular to their own historical moment without losing the intellectual autonomy that makes what they do potentially interesting to many, many others looking for alternative ways of feeling that can replace complex, often intractable realities with experiences powerful enough to put ideas back into play.