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THE VALUE OF OBJECTS:
THE DISCUSSION OF *QUALITY* IN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS
WITH ART HISTORIANS AND MUSEUM CURATORS

“Painters and poets argue only about rank;
philosophers argue over existence.”

--Paul Valéry¹

“There is no solution because there is no
problem.”

--Marcel Duchamp²

This essay examines how art historians and museum curators recorded in the 1990s and 2000s in two multi-interview projects discussed the concept of “quality.” As professionals who were working closely with objects, the criteria for establishing why certain works are worthy of attention but others are not has been,

¹ Paul Valéry, “Léonard et les Philosophes,” in Valéry, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 1:1236.

² Quoted in Henri-Pierre Roché, “Souvenirs sur Marcel Duchamp,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 1 (1953), 1136.

and remains, a marker of professional subjectivity. The literature on quality in art is so large as to be beyond the capacity of any individual to read, much less master, even if that was all one had to do. With classes to teach, books and articles to write, exhibits to organize, and a myriad of administrative tasks, most professionals have time only to skim the surface of a discussion that all would agree is central to the work they do. The working concepts that professionals use on a daily basis need to be distinguished from on-going theoretical debates that provide an essential backdrop to decisions. Oral history interviews provide a window into how individual narrators, the interviewees, have synthesized their understandings of theoretical arguments into a set of practical values useful for thinking about on-going tasks. In discussing how they defined “quality” and how they understood what “objects” offer both scholars and the public, interviewees returned to the formation of their professional identities and the unresolved problems of their careers that arose with every effort to translate principles into practice.

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During the 1990s, I collaborated with the Getty Research Institute on a project using oral history interviews to examine the development of art history and related fields across the twentieth century. The project began with the goal of examining the experiences of art historians from continental Europe who fled to the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Forty-five interviews were conducted with surviving scholars, students who worked with

them in their new homes, students working with the first generation of American and British art historians trained in then-new Central European methods, as well as others working in architectural history, archaeology, or in museums, interviewees whose perspectives allowed further insight into the influence of mid-twentieth-century intellectual migration on the understanding of visual and material culture.³ Transfer of ideas, their adaptation to new intellectual and academic institutions, and indigenization over several generations offered an opportunity to see how the underlying ideas of a discipline changed over several generations. One method we developed for tracking change over eight decades was to identify several working concepts important to the field, among them: “style,” “quality,” “iconography,” “connoisseurship,” “patronage,” “iconography,” and “meaning,” the interpretive practice of which could be discussed in depth with each interviewee as appropriate to the work they had previously done.

Quality proved to be a uniquely useful concept for observing change as responses revealed unambiguous shifts in how the term was used and regarded across three generations. The generational pattern of responses to this particular question was striking even given the range of individual interpretations of the concept that one would expect. For the oldest generation interviewed, trained largely in the years between the two world wars, quality had been and remained fundamental to their conception of art history as a study of finely crafted objects and images. The middle generation, trained during the two decades following World

³ All interviews are available at the Library of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California, under the series title “Interviews with art historians, 1991-2002.”

War II, developed increasingly stronger interests in the social contexts informing the production of objects and images. While not abandoning a conception of quality, they placed less importance on it in how they analyzed work. The definitions of “quality” that they offered were limited and pragmatic. The youngest generation in the series, trained during the epistemological, social, and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, dismissed quality as an inherently meaningless term that obfuscated how visual and material culture reproduced ideology and shaped subjectivity. Despite its absence from their conceptual tool kits, much of the foundational work the category of “quality” had done for the interwar generation shifted onto the art object itself.

Oral history interviews do not capture the complexity of ideas intellectuals debate in print, even when the interviews have been done with scholars who themselves wrote at length on a subject. Efforts to define “quality” in art since the eighteenth century have occupied hundreds of thousands pages in a range of disciplines, some of whose practitioners, such as philosophers of aesthetics, have been only tangentially engaged with actual art objects. Theoretical definitions have been debated over and over again, with each generation bringing new considerations to the issue, depending on their theoretical or philosophical predispositions. The conversational nature of an interview however undercuts any tendency an interviewee might have to lapse into lecture mode—though of course on occasion that does happen. Responses to interview questions about categories of analysis grow from how the interviewee has translated theorized frameworks worthy of a lecture or an essay into working concepts suitable for the practical

situations of everyday work life. Oral history privileges tentative, practical conclusions typical of conversational exchange rather than well-argued principles prepared for publication and/or conference presentations. Working concepts need to be communicated easily to a variety of people whose help will be critical to the success of a class, an exhibition, or a publication, and they need to be phrased in terms that are comprehensible to those with whom one works that do not pay attention to more complex discussions.

In the course of on-going professional activity, summary statements allow concepts to be put to work in a variety of practical situations. Concepts that are complex and theorized in literature appear in records of everyday discourse as ready-to-hand precepts that can guide whether or not to buy a work of art, what to include in an exhibit, which slides to include in a lecture, how to write about an object in a book or article, who to invite to participate in a symposium or to contribute to an anthology or a to an exhibition catalogue. Participation in discussions, some of them in formal settings, most of them not, as well as reading, provide a backdrop to choices made, but decisions are practical and situational, regardless of whatever ideals lurk in penumbra. Sherman Lee, a historian of Asian art who served as director of the Cleveland Museum of Art from 1958 to 1983, stated, "To stubbornly repeat over and over again, we must have quality, the best, the finest, simply does not make any rational sense. You've got to balance and juggle and compare and constantly think about what is top quality within a given artistic

context.”⁴ Oral history provides an excellent vantage point for seeing what potentially dense concepts like “quality” came to signify in practical terms for interviewees.

For Lee’s generation, despite his recognition of practical limits, “quality” was among the most important categories needed to do one’s work, a position that Lee shared absolutely. George Kubler, at Yale University from 1930 until his death in 1996, a prominent mid-twentieth century scholar of Iberian and Latin American art and architecture, articulated a conviction that the epistemological basis of art history as a credible field of inquiry rested on developing a proper concept of quality:

The history of art is already a value judgment, a value judgment that carries a whole panoply of value judgments in the art. Not popular art, not rustic art, not nursery art, but adult art, art of lasting significance. A whole set of decisions is present in the term "history of art," of previous assumptions, underlying assumptions discarding most art and retaining only the cream level.⁵

⁴ Sherman E. Lee, interviewed 1992 by Joel Gardner, “Interviews with art historians, 1991-2002” (Getty Research Institute, 1995), Tape V, Side Two.

⁵ George Kubler, “Art Historian: George A. Kubler,” interviewed 1991 by Richard Cándida Smith and Thomas F. Reese (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 197.

Kubler reiterated at several points in his interview that “quality” was an objective term referring to an excellence of form, idea, composition, and fabrication technique that compelled admiration. Quality was not synonymous with opinion, the temporary, passing enthusiasm of a generation for particular work that he termed “fashionable.” The test whether an object had the *quality* that made it a suitable subject for art historians was repetition of a positive evaluation given to an object over a lengthy period of time. Admiration that endured over many generations underscored the influence that an object exercised on subsequent art production, as well as on cultural imagination more generally. As a historian working on pre-Columbian and medieval art, he was not interested in artists as individuals or in their stories, if only because the creators of work he studied were seldom known. His focus was simultaneously formal and social, a legacy of his having studied under Henri Focillon, the founder of the art history program at Yale University. Kubler studied how institutions collaborated to solve particularly challenging problems. New construction techniques, for example, inspired masons in medieval Europe to compete with each in increasing the volume of space they enclosed in their churches. The varying quality of efforts to the problem of how to treat a dramatically larger exterior façade was evident to the artisans involved, as well as their patrons. Solutions had to be visually pleasing and practical. To the degree that new approaches could be replicated in subsequent work, the cumulative effect of experiments at many sites radically transformed every aspect of church construction and generated new ways of thinking about the relation of spatial organization, decoration, representation of religious symbols, and theology that art

historians subsequently described as a transition from Romanesque to Gothic architecture. The resources particular types of art required made them an excellent measure of the desire they excited. As far as Kubler was concerned, without accepting the objective nature of quality, the various stories that connected together formed the history of art could not be seen and therefore could not be told.

Other interviewees from Kubler's generation also offered a definition of "quality" that they considered indisputably "objective," but their accounts focused more on the unique responses that work by a great artist generated—or should generate. Agnes Mongan, a specialist in drawings at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University from 1929 to her retirement in 1975, noted that if a work is by a great craftsman, "the minute you see it, it will speak to you. It has a kind of vibrance that carries its ideas."⁶ She rejected the idea that anyone could articulate the basis for a masterpiece's power in words. One had to rely on one's eyes and the pleasure they received. With proper training, though perhaps the gifts that only genius bestows were also needed, one became receptive to objective truths conveyed through the senses, an argument she tried to illuminate by moving beyond vision: "there's no question that food of quality, drink of quality, clothes of quality all have some fundamental that a second-class food doesn't have. I think all very great collectors of art have been very fussy about what they ate. Or what they wore. Or where they lived."⁷ Craig Hugh Smyth, director of the Institute of Fine Arts in New

⁶ Agnes Mongan, "Museum Curator: Agnes Mongan," interviewed 1991 by Taina Rikala de Noriega and 1993 by Richard Cándida Smith (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 240.

⁷ Mongan, "Museum Curator: Agnes Mongan," 274.

York City from 1951 to 1973 and of the Villa I Tatti in Rome from 1973 to 1985, claimed that the quality of an object forced a person to love it and to want to learn more about it.⁸ For Lane Faison, professor of art history at Williams College from 1936 to 1976, “Having an eye is something like having a natural ability if you're going to play tennis. You can be taught to a certain point.”⁹

Quality could be divorced from objects through an emphasis on iconology, the study of symbolic meanings expressed through formalized representational techniques. James Ackerman, speaking of his training at the Institute of Fine Arts, recalled,

Nobody told us to go look at works of art. It was characteristic of this [school] that it held photographs to be more useful than originals. Of course, when doing iconography, photographs are almost as good. Well, there's something about the kind of formal analysis that went on that didn't involve any sensual factors. That is to say, form was thought of as it is represented in a black-and-white photograph, and color and texture and scale were irrelevant. I had no sense of what constituted artistic quality. When I went abroad as a student and found that it was possible on a student stipend to collect drawings, it

⁸ Craig Hugh Smyth, “Art Historian: Craig Hugh Smyth,” interviewed 1991 by Taina Rikala de Noriega and Thomas F. Reese and 1992 by Richard Cándida Smith (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 431.

⁹ Lane Faison, “Art Historian: Lane Faison,” interviewed 1992 by Richard Cándida Smith (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 202.

was the first time that I ever began to understand what discriminations were or to make some sort of critical observation.¹⁰

George Heard Hamilton, a student at Yale who also studied under Focillon, was the solitary spokesperson of his generation in this set of interviews who expressed doubt about the concept of quality he had learned:

Now, you go into a museum career, and you very quickly hear about people who have "an eye" and people who don't have "an eye." It's always in the singular. He or she has got an eye. He or she can tell what's good at once. Now, presumably that eye is sharpened—ugly verb there—by experience, by comparison, by a great deal of travel and thought and reading and conversation and everything. Okay. That may be the final polish on it, but is there something that you are born with that tells you that this or that is not very good? Now, I think this is quite peculiar. I don't know. I don't dare discuss it with my friends in the profession because so many of them have very good eyes. I just throw this out. If ever in your future life you find anybody who's had the same experience, telephone me at once.¹¹

¹⁰ James Ackerman, "Art Historian: James Ackerman," interviewed 1991 by Joel Gardner (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 55.

¹¹ George Heard Hamilton, "Art Historian: George Heard Hamilton," interviewed 1991 by Taina Rikala de Noriega (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1993), 71.

Hamilton had been a specialist in Marcel Duchamp and twentieth-century modernism. He was part of an intellectual movement that following World War II challenged ideas that an object's quality was inherent to it and compelled recognition. For younger generations, this precept was increasingly outmoded, as scholars grew more interested in the social construction of cultural values. Art objects could not be separated from the relationships they represented and helped reinforce. The deep truths art was now imagined to reveal turned historical and social.

Quality still was a useful term in that it referenced the characteristics that defined a historical formation. Interviewees from the generation trained after the war typically referenced the more formal, philosophical sense of the word when asked about the subject: quality involved analysis of the *qualia*, the attributes that collectively define the nature of something, for example, the quality of a bird includes possessing feathers and beaks, laying eggs, and with a few notable exceptions being able to fly. The epistemological questions connected to how one discerns, identifies, and confirms the qualities of an entity are formidable, but for art historians and museum curators the practical aspects of "quality" could be understood as learning how to recognize the differences between Leonardo's and Rafael's pencil work or the distinctive juxtaposition of colors typical of Klee and Mirò, professional activities associated with connoisseurship, the ability to identify an artist's hand, the materials used, and the period in which a work was fabricated by examining details of form, imagery, and fabrication process. In terms of the work done relying on traditions of connoisseurship, an art historian or a curator verified

the attributed author of a work, eliminating incorrect attributions and exposing forgeries; determined the relationship of the work to others by the same artist and whether the work could be considered as a sketch, work in progress, or completed; assessed the condition of an object and the degree to which it might have been damaged, modified, or in other ways altered from the way in which the author had left it; and proposed comparable works by other artists with which a relationship might be established. Connoisseurship stimulated work in the social contexts affecting the production of work such as patronage, the circulation of artist manuals, or the development of criticism that established evaluative standards that artists worked with or, when society permitted, rebelled against.¹²

Even with this shift, quality remained something inherent to the objects studied, something that required professional training and, under some formulations, innate talent to recognize. The youngest generation of historians interviewed, trained in the 1960s and 1970s, began with premise that art was a social construction. Their work delved into the potential of visual culture to reinforce or subvert ideologies, with particular concern for construction and circulation of conceptions about identity. With this shift, “quality” as an analytic category largely disappeared from the interviews recorded for this project, or when it surfaced briefly was understood to reference historically situated concepts, the decoding of which helped decode the roles types assigned to objects in different societies. Discussion of quality assumed a new ethical content as they focused on

¹² Julius S. Held, “Art Historian: Julius S. Held,” interviewed 1991 by Taina Rikala de Noriega and 1992 by Richard Cándida Smith (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1994), 61-78.

evaluative criteria that had historically excluded work by women artists from the canon or relegated popular culture or the work of racial minorities to anthropological study of folklore, not to be mixed with the high art traditions that art history had recognized in Europe, South Asia, and East Asia. The criteria by which an object was determined to be art or not could be combined with other concerns to sketch out a fuller understanding of art objects as fields within which social forces played out in complex and contradictory ways. Manfredo Tafuri, an architectural historian from Italy, articulated the new conceptualization in a particularly cogent manner, but one that took for granted that the object itself was physically available and distinct from the various questions to which it could be linked:

Quindi noi possiamo, di fronte a questo oggetto, compiere un'analisi specifica dell'oggetto. Se noi poi vogliamo comprendere, insieme alle qualità formali dell'oggetto, alla biografia del design, capire i modi di produzione di quest'oggetto, il mercato di quest'oggetto, proprio oggettivamente, con strumenti di storia economica e di storia produttiva, i modi di pubblicizzazione, noi possiamo farlo, però c'è qualcosa che eccede tutto questo, no, che è l'oggetto stesso. Il quale va benissimo, si può inserire in questa grande storia, ma io debbo sapere leggere quello che lui dice dentro questa storia complessa.¹³

¹³ Manfredo Tafuri, "La store come progetto," interviewed 1992 by Luisa Passerini (Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Getty Research Institute, 1993), 133.

The relative diminishment of “quality” to one historically situated cultural factor among many was an important element in the growing distance between the story of art as told in universities and in museums. A growing pluralism of perspectives gave museum staff greater freedom in the shows they presented, and the epistemologically free-floating but central role of the object itself fitted comfortably with everyday practices concerning acquisition and exhibition. The understanding that social relationships stood at the heart of what made artwork powerful could largely be taken for granted and expanded opportunities for interpretative exhibitions, but older ideas of quality as something imminent in objects retained practical importance and could not be easily discarded. The question remained what were to be compelling standards that could settle disagreements about work to be collected and/or exhibited. Simultaneous with the paradigm transition in art history was a rapid growth in museum studies, allowing practitioners to think more theoretically about the distinctive features of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects.

Even if “quality” could not be jettison for a variety of practical reasons that I will address in this next section, museum professionals knew that the practical process of evaluating different objects was complex. Curators themselves were art historians, increasingly coming to their jobs with advanced degrees, but because they worked directly with objects they often told different stories than many of their academic counterparts, a difference that related to how a viewer responds to objects sitting in a gallery rather than to how a reader responds to an argument

propounded in the pages of a book or article. An inherent part of the difference was that as determining the quality of an object diminished in academic art history, the practice grew in importance in museums. In addition, museum staff confronted the often daunting but potentially exhilarating fact that objects possessed definite monetary values, not solely in terms of the price to buy when a work went on the market, but values had to be determined and redetermined regularly for insurance, shipping, and conservation purposes.

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In 2006, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) asked the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley, to collaborate on a project honoring the seventy-fifth anniversary of the institution in 2010. Founded in 1935, SFMOMA was the first museum on the West Coast devoted to exhibiting and collecting work by both modern masters and younger, less-established artists. ROHO had interviewed the founding director of the museum, Grace McCann Morley, in 1960, two years after she had resigned. ROHO had also previously interviewed board members as well as artists close to the museum during her tenure. These interviews provided material on the museum from its founding in 1935 to about 1965. For the new project we interviewed fifty-seven individuals, including all the museum's directors except the second (who had died), curators, trustees, education programmers and other staff, artists and gallery owners who have been close to the museum at different periods, ranging from the

late 1940s to the present. The interviews for this project can be read on-line at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/sfmoma/>.

The museum had a contentious history that the project had to address. Every director except the current one has left as a result of disputes with trustees over institutional priorities. Trustees have resigned as well to indicate their unhappiness with the museum's direction. Interviews reflect this difficult history—some interviewees were prepared to be brutally frank; others preferred to treat divisions between the trustees and within the professional staff with as brief a discussion as possible. No one could fully avoid these issues, given how consistent internal divisions were throughout the organization's existence. The recurrent questions dividing the institution have been the relation of developing a collection of recognized masterworks to showing a broad range of new work, and the closely related issue of the balance between showing work produced by local arts communities versus making the local community knowledgeable of what major international artists have done. The divisions are not unusual for a regional institution, with limited resources compared to New York City or a European capital. For all sides of most important disputes, the questions centered on the standards of quality that the museum followed, and there was little consensus as to what constituted the "best," the most "important" bodies of work that should be the focus of the museum's activities. Regardless of the choices made, museum leaders expected criticism for any program adopted.

The founding director, Grace McCann Morley, gave priority to local artists, but she collected Latin American, European, and U.S. modernist work as well, always

with an eye to finding younger artists of promise whose work was still inexpensive. One of her most important acquisitions, criticized when she bought it in 1945, was Jackson Pollock's first (semi-) abstract painting, *Guardians of the Secret* (1943). Morley also bought comparable work by Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, pieces that demonstrate with exceptional clarity each painter's transition from representational to abstract painting in the early 1940s. After she left, the museum hired a director who focused on obtaining School of Paris masterpieces. He sold the early Rothko, a particularly important inspiration to many local painters, in order to pay for several European works he desired. The furor surrounding the deal led to his resigning after four years, and the board hired Gerald Nordland, known as a proponent of post-1945 U.S. art. He lasted six years, to be succeeded by Henry Hopkins, arguably the most prominent promoter of West Coast art at the time. Twelve years later, John R. Lane, who came with an impressive background at several major museums in the eastern United States, took over the helm. Lane transformed the museum by insisting on more internationally focused exhibits. He strongly supported recent German art and bought Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter in quantity. His curators organized the first U.S. show of Brazilian conceptual artist Hélio Oiticica in 1990 and became earlier supporters of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. Lane was particularly enthusiastic about post-1960 U.S. art and promoted the work of Jeff Koons, Richard Serra, and Matthew Barney among others. Shortly after completing construction of a new building for the museum, designed by Mario Botta, that relocated the museum to the city's downtown business district, Lane resigned. David Ross came to San Francisco from the Whitney Museum of American

Art in New York City with a charge from trustees to help them transform the museum's collection by purchasing masterpieces by well-known modern and contemporary artists. A capacious, expensive acquisitions program was possible given the sizable fortunes developing in the San Francisco Bay Area as a result of the dot-com boom at the end of the 1990s. With the recession of 2000-2001, a strategy of growth through spending lots of money threatened to bankrupt the museum. Ross left, and Neal Benezra, with years of experience at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., came with proven ability to run a tight ship while maintaining high professional standards. By regaining control of the budget without sacrificing programming, Benezra regained the confidence of the trustees and local collectors. He has presided over the largest expansion of the museum's collection in its history, primarily due to gifts to the museum by collectors. With another round of expansion planned, by the end of the 2010s the museum will have more gallery space than the Museum of Modern Art in New York currently has. A recent bequest of 1,500 high-quality works of post-1945 art from the collection of Don and Doris Fisher, the founders of The Gap, along with other major collections from Bay Area patrons pledged to the museum, gives the museum staff hope that their permanent collection has become the most significant repository of U.S. art produced during the second half of the twentieth century.

The desire to "transform" the museum has been a recurrent theme in interviews. The expenses inherent to growth, even if there were no ambitions to attain international stature, guaranteed that questions of "quality" have been entangled with the role of money more generally in the art world. The costs of

every activity have increased dramatically as the museum has grown, but they would have risen under any circumstances. Henry Hopkins, director from 1974 to 1986, spoke of his need to contain costs if he were to retain his independence and that of his curators. Yet that proved impossible. When he arrived in 1974, he could mount a major exhibition for \$50,000. Ten years later, he complained, a comparable show cost \$3 million, due to increased costs in insurance, shipping, royalties, and requirements from lenders of work exhibited that the museum publish a sizable catalogue. The more expensive shows grew, the greater the importance of scheduling “blockbuster” exhibitions that attracted large crowds.¹⁴ As mounting exhibits solely to make money became increasingly necessary, curatorial staff felt that their interests were being sacrificed, and most left for other jobs in institutions more committed to their local communities, whether in California or another part of the country. Many of their replacements, hired because of prior experience with both contemporary art and blockbuster shows, tended to come to the museum after having worked in New York. Their higher salaries signaled to international exhibition circuits that SFMOMA was becoming a reliable partner. Budgets kept racing upwards, for many reasons, but the bigger the budget the more important an institution appeared in the broader world—a theme that every director without exception touched on. Attendance and ticket sales have become and are now extremely important given the increased costs for every museum activity.

Attendance at the museum has grown dramatically over the last forty years to

¹⁴ Henry Hopkins, “SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Henry Hopkins, SFMOMA Director 1974-1986,” interviewed 2007 by Lisa Rubens and Richard Cándida Smith (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 04-00:29:14.

nearly 1 million visitors annually, a development consistent with what has happened around the world with art museums.

The new direction required change in how the museum viewed its public. For the first fifty years, trustees and staff conceived of the museum as an educational institution contributing to raising the cultural standards of the broader community and therefore entry needed to be free. The museum staff also spent more time organizing frequent exhibits outside the museum walls in community venues. The educational rhetoric remains to this day, though not that of cultural uplift, which is well understood to smack of old-fashioned social control ideals. Since the late 1970s, when subsidies from the city and state governments started declining, public outreach has been measured by ticket sales. Museum visitors are consumers whose dollars could just as easily go to more popular forms of entertainment. The value for them is demonstrated by their willingness to pay a \$12 admissions fee, plus additional charges for special exhibits. The experience not only has to be “worth a detour” but it should “knock your socks off,” to quote two phrases curators repeated in the interviews, language borrowed from one of the museum’s most generous trustees, who used them to explain why the museum needed to spend considerably more money for the art it purchased.

In discussing the purchase of René Magritte’s *Personal Values* (1952) for \$6.5 million, curator Gary Garrels cited the importance this particular painting had had for Jasper Johns and other post-abstract expressionist U.S. artists. Garrels combined an erudite historical interpretation of the painting’s position in the trajectory leading to contemporary art with appreciation for the “buzz” the painting generated

when it went on the market. The excitement the work generated among potential buyers served as a measure of the painting's importance, an excitement indicated both by the talk the painting generated and by the price it commanded. For most of the museum's history, the institution had never spent more than \$100,000 for a single work, on the assumption that a contemporary art museum should husband its meager financial resources and buy widely among living artists. The decision to compete in the auction for *Personal Values* involved a major psychological leap that required all involved to rethink the criteria they brought to evaluating the work the museum wanted to acquire. Given this dramatic shift involved, the decision to compete for Magritte's painting when it unexpectedly came on the market appears in many interviews as a marker of enhanced professionalism resulting in enhanced international stature.¹⁵

Imagining oneself in competition with the Museum of Modern Art or the Tate Modern may well have been a more important development than the amount of money spent, but an upward redefinition of the peer institutions against which one wants one's work judged cannot happen without increased financial resources. Henry Hopkins observed that his goal was to make the museum the most important institution of modern and contemporary art on the West Coast, and the effort to compete with museums in Los Angeles particularly, but also in Seattle, probably contributed to the rising costs he experienced. Competition as a value had not been part of the original mission for the museum. In her interview, Grace McCann Morley

¹⁵ Gary Garrels, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Gary Garrels, SFMOMA Curator of Painting and Sculpture," interviewed 2009 by Richard Cándida Smith (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2011), Tape 3.

dismissed competition in favor of cooperation. Morley operated with an assumption of limited resources, but also with a conviction that the museum was part of larger mission to educate the public in visual culture. "In San Francisco," she said, "it is always important to try not to duplicate but to have each museum do those parts of the art picture that are its natural concern. It that way the parts fit finally together into a total report on art."¹⁶ Cooperation with the Museum of Modern Art was important to her strategy of keeping her community informed of new developments in New York and elsewhere. The value of cooperation extended to having artists select the juried shows, creating a situation where Morley assumed that artist-jurors would have to work hard to avoid prejudice against particular styles. Exhibitions achieved a greater unity, she thought, when the selectors had to discuss their preferences and abide by majority vote, a process she called "unity of standard of quality."¹⁷

Far from being innate, quality seemed inseparable from questions of money and the power that its possessors enjoy, and those links were essential if the museum were to realize its ambitions of leaping from a local to an international arena. John Lane, director from 1987 to 1997, was clear that, "It was my goal to create in San Francisco a great contemporary art collection. You can do that if you have enough money. ... And not just do it with the museum, but to try and persuade and encourage those people who were art collectors in San Francisco to get involved and get ambitious, as well. The institution, working together with the collectors, it

¹⁶ Grace McCann Morley, "Art, Artists, Museums, and the San Francisco Museum of Art," interviewed 1960 by Suzanne B. Riess (Regional Cultural History Project, University of California, Berkeley), 37.

¹⁷ Morley, "Art, Artists, Museums, and the San Francisco Museum of Art," 81, 87.

was my view that we could, coming together, make something that is truly great here.”¹⁸ The museum developed a new approach to collecting that encouraged trustees and patrons to buy particularly expensive work for the museum, but it remained their personal property for a defined period of time before being donated to the museum collection. During that interim period, patrons enjoyed the work in their homes except when the museum wanted to borrow the work for special exhibitions. David Ross, Lane’s successor as director, argued that this policy augmented the possibilities for what the museum could collect while defining collectors as a core public that the museum could educate and bring directly into larger conversations about the unique value of great work: “If you can allow a patron to spend their life with a great work of art in their home, in their lives, it does two things. One is, it inspires them and makes them feel reasonable about spending \$10, \$20, \$30 million on a picture. That’s a lot of money in any time, in anybody’s terms, even if you’re a billionaire, to spend \$20 million or \$5 million, or even \$1 million. It’s a lot of money. So if that picture’s going to also remain in your property, or in your presence, in your home, you can rationalize it.”¹⁹

The more successful the institution in achieving its primary goals of exhibiting and collecting work while educating the public, the more money is required to achieve its goals. Success now typically comes by presenting work

¹⁸ John R. Lane, ““SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: John R. Lane, SFMOMA Director 1987-1997,” interviewed 2006 by Lisa Rubens, Richard Cándida Smith, and Peter Samis (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 09-00:37:51.

¹⁹ David Ross, ““SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: David Ross, SFMOMA Director 1998-2001,” interviewed 2007-2009 by Lisa Rubens, Richard Cándida Smith, and Jill Sterrett (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 02-00:12:38.

already widely accepted as “important” rather than taking risks with unknown artists or material that has not yet been discussed in major art journals. In that sense, the museum has moved far from the cutting edge of contemporary art, and other institutions have emerged in the Bay Area to fill the gap of presenting the public the most intense and difficult new artists. When I asked about how the museum discussed the quality of work proposed for acquisition, David Ross insisted that a high-profile museum could acquire work only if had already been vetted and determined by a broad range of critics, historians, and museum curators to be a masterpiece. His response subsumed “quality” into questions of “authority” that a leading museum must exercise by respecting established critical opinion. Money does not establish quality, but, if spent prudently, serves as a marker of a previously formed collective evaluation in the art historical community. The issues debated during acquisition meetings are *never*, he insisted, about the quality of a work because the piece would even not be under consideration if it were not already a recognized important work by a recognized important artist. The issues under discussion are whether the asking price is do-able and whether there are conservation issues.

This approach can be compared with Grace McCann Morley’s vision for the museum she started in 1935. She defined the quality of her programs by referring to her most basic values: bring in the people, listen to the artists, show as diverse a range of work as is feasible. That she presented the first museum shows of artists like Jackson Pollock or the first U.S. shows of artists like Frida Kahlo demonstrated the success of her approach, as far as she was concerned, but she was also clear that

the thousands of other artists she showed, most unknown, were equally important because it allowed the public to see how “visual intelligence” was developing over time in the hands of a broad movement trying to solve shared problems. She was emphatic that her ability to get work into places like department stores, cafeterias, or high schools were equally important because they reinforced the ideal of the modern art museum as a bridge putting contemporary artists into dialogue with their fellow citizens.

Most of the interviews, including those with trustees, largely successful local business leaders and their spouses, reveal strong ambivalence about the increased role of money and the shadow it places on the integrity/quality of the intellectual work the museum performs. Those involved, each of whom has invested a considerable amount of time in the work of the museum, were clearly not satisfied with any implication that money, quality, and success were indivisible. Each curator was eager to describe difficult shows they had organized presenting important but difficult artists whose work baffled or even antagonized most viewers. They spent considerable time justifying the selection of these shows, describing how they overcame resistance from their peers and from the trustees, and then worked with the education department on developing a context to answer potential objections from the museum’s public. A recurrent motif in these accounts was bemused confession that they often did not correctly anticipate what audience objections would be, a way of saying that as specialists, they really cannot know what the general public thinks. Their work puts them in dialogue with the art objects, and the most important audience the curators address, they stated over and over again,

consists of other curators at peer institutions. Gary Garrels spoke as well of developing a collecting strategy of buying a large number of early works from a single artist, work that was seldom seen and for the most part still in the artist's personal collection given that it had been created before they had developed their best-known pieces. He self-consciously was building on Morley's success in acquiring paintings by important abstract painters created at the beginning of their move away from representational painting, but, because of the greater financial support he enjoyed, he could conceive of a much larger-scale of acquisitions, twenty to thirty or more works that would allow him to assemble definitive study collections for artists long established as modern "masters," beginning with Robert Rauschenberg and Ellsworth Kelly. His goal has been to enable the museum to present parallel in-depth stories of creative development that could force viewers to rethink what they knew about each artist and hence to question the most commonly told accounts they may have heard about the transition from modern to postmodern to contemporary art.²⁰

Another way that curators spoke of reacting against an increased *requirement* to present "authoritative" work has been to dig deeper into the museum's vaults and present lesser-known work juxtaposed to the blue-chip masterpieces in thematically focused explorations of imagery, technique, and materials. Curators have invited well-known artists to spend time in the vaults and curate shows that reexamine past moments in the development of modern, postmodern, and contemporary art. The resurrection of a broader range of previous

²⁰ Garrels, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Gary Garrels," 03-00:53:53.

work is possible only because the predecessors of today's curators had different criteria guiding their decisions, criteria that grew from a need to be frugal. This practice of resurrecting earlier visions of quality and the ways works collected by predecessors could challenge contemporary assumptions, representing a fissure within curators' self-understanding, allowed for the interview discussions to explore the conflicting standards of quality with which curators work.

These discussions on the stratagems curators developed to assure that their intellectual interests, and not money, define the quality of the museum's activities led into discussions of the place of the "object" in modern and contemporary art. Resistant to all stable interpretation, the object provided the firmest foundation for the work that they do because a great work can never be reduced to any evaluation placed on it. The integrity of the artist's accomplishment remains open to all who approach the work with open eyes. Because the object itself did not change, but its presentation and interpretation did, the ability of an object to provoke new responses demonstrated an innate quality to reveal core ideas and values at work at any give time in the professional world that art historians, critics, and curators comprised. The "object itself" retained the functions that "quality" had performed in the pre-World War II period, but in a form adjusted for the new priority given to social construction. The formalist survival permitted the object to retain an element of independence from the fluctuation of interpretive frameworks. The critic and the historian as the definers of quality were subjects of history, but to the degree that an artist's work stimulated new responses, it offered a glimpse into an effectively atemporal existence that stood above evaluation.

Graham Beal, a curator at SFMOMA in the 1980s, currently director of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, noted that modern art as a movement overthrew the authority of the connoisseur and critics. The victory of modern art was the victory of the artist to define what quality was by making the very definition of what art was project specific. Art was no longer a statement of values, whether eternal or socially constructed, but an experiment in creating an object that conveyed unusual thought-provoking sensations. The supremacy of the object as a vehicle for deconstructing concepts muddied the waters, he continued. By 1980, the object replaced the artist as the authority, and the artist had become a vehicle for producing objects valued for their unusual effects.²¹ Another curator described a great work of art as an object that started with the artist's intentionality and skill but then *escaped* the initial plan and achieved a complexity that no human mind could have ever imagined before the object took on its own reality.²² If the object was potentially autonomous even from the artist who made it, collectors took on increased importance. The money value an object received seemed solidly "objective" compared to critical testimony or subjective responses from curators. The interviews suggest that philosophical aspects of late twentieth-century contemporary art contributed to the triumph of the collector as the position within the circuit of exchange that an art object defines best suited to provide consistent,

²¹ Graham Beal, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Graham Beal, Curator of Painting and Sculpture," interviewed 2007 by Richard Cándida Smith and Lisa Rubens (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 02-00:42:18 to 02-00:46:10.

²² Janet Bishop, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Janet Bishop, Curator of Painting and Sculpture," interviewed 2008 by Richard Cándida Smith and Peter Samis (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 01-00:16:09, 04-00:35:27, 04-00:49:26.

comparable, and socially relevant markers for the quality of art. The collector as repository of passion, knowledge, and money firmly established that quality was a social construct and not a universal revealed by acts of genius—simultaneously validating the autonomy of objects and the social constructionist interpretive position of postmodern cultural thought.

-3-

A social constructionist perspective of art returns insistently to money as a marker of quality if only because in the current structure of art institutions in the United States, money is the basic reality determining the limits of what can be done, though not specific choices made. Money in its various forms—earned income, operating expenses, salaries, donations, value of work acquired or exhibited—has served as a marker of growth, opportunity, dilemmas, and dangers. Money plays as well a deeply symbolic role that is part and parcel of being “postmodern,” that is rejecting modernist faith in the reality of transcendental universals that works of art can reveal. Instead the object reveals the flux of contemporary passions, and the money some are willing to spend helps to measure the intensity of the feelings a given body of work has generated. The symbolic role escapes the limits of social construction to take those working in the art world into a set of epistemological dilemmas that curators faced, growing from the relation of the object to the explanatory language curators develop to explain the value they have found in particular work. The solutions they arrived at were practical, not theoretical, even if

broader philosophical implications might be discerned. The curator engaged in an equivalent of Charles Sanders Peirce's four denials that provided the foundation for his system of semiotics:

"No introspection"

"No intuition"

"All thought operates through the medium of signs"

"No conception of objects except through signs"²³

By denying introspection, Peirce insisted that all knowledge of internal states must be inferred by external facts. Knowledge of psychological responses to art must be derived from external facts, or else it remains an ineffable feeling of the sublime. The "psychological load" of a given work is discovered in the complexity of the language used to describe the relation of content, form, artist intention, and an idealized viewer response. The work itself stands as a sign for the circuit of responses it has generated.

By denying intuition, Peirce argued that all cognition grows from previous cognitions, which is to say that direct physical encounter with a work is shaped by the language available for those involved to describe and debate what it might be,

²³ Charles Sanders Peirce, "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1 (1867-1893), ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 11-27.

what it could be, and what it should be. Language “catalyzes” new, deeper perceptions. The curator’s job rests on an ability to mediate and direct the relation of verbalized response and physical encounter. The encounter grows deeper the more the languages a curator offers stimulate new perceptions, often connected with an ability to link the work to other works not immediately present but available in archived accounts of art practice across time and geography.

If “all thought operates through the medium of signs,” a work of art is a sign that evokes a response that circulates as it is thrown off into words. In the circuit of subjectivity, verbal approximations are always tentative; they generate responses that add on top of, at times covering over, previous remarks. The verbal circuits even if prolix preserve the centrality and the purity of the object, which standing mute, is important to the degree that it provokes continuing efforts to recapture the experience it offers in other expressive forms. Since an object is not limited to the particular signs that are observed in any particular set of social relationships, the art object retains its inherent mystery. Its “quality,” in terms of its position in circuits of exchange, is its continuing ability to generate new efforts to explore a wider range of meanings that can be imputed to the sensations the object produces. These meanings can be registered in terms of the money that a collector or a museum is willing to offer for it; in the words a curator develops to explain why an object “is worth a detour” to fellow curators, to trustees and potential donors, and to the museum-going public that views it. It is axiomatic that meaning does not lie inherently or solely in perception as an individual relation to the object, but in the sequence/exchange of interpretations that follow interaction. An object, in Peirce’s

semiotic universe, does not directly cause ideas to form; objects present puzzles that cause observers to consult the archive of previous experience and formulated to knowledge to offer an interpretation, that if actionable becomes an experience contributing to new knowledge of the world. It was precisely this quality that David Ross found in Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box*, an acquisition Ross pointed to as one of the most important he made during his short tenure as director. "For me, of course," Ross said, "Duchamp is at the foundation of the entire generation of artists who questioned art's ontological purpose and its role as a provoker of questions, rather than an answerer of questions."²⁴ In a utilitarian object, the sequence of interpretations is short, and other than idiosyncratic responses, culminates in precise, limited understanding of what it is for. With an art object, the sequence of interpretations may not be infinite but its power as an object for thought is seen through an unfolding chain of interpretations. As Arthur Danto has expressed it, all objects are sensuous, but art objects generate a process of "interpretive seeing ... which in effect means framing interpretive hypotheses as to meaning."²⁵

Peirce's fourth denial, "no conception of objects except through signs," illuminates the centrality that curators have in a conceptual framework where objects retain autonomy but are also translated into signs of the responses they have the potential to generate. Curators define the terms that allow the emotional and intellectual effects artwork generates to be exchanged. They establish the art

²⁴ Ross, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: David Ross," 07-00:12:58.

²⁵ Quote from Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37 (1998), 133. See also Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: 1986), 81-115.

object as an expression of particular social conventions but also as a living autonomous entity that continues to generate responses that cannot be fully predicted, nor limited by the languages of a given time and place. Curators articulate the purposes that much further down the road incorporate money into an on-going circuit of interpretation; to that degree they establish the parameters for monetizing value, translating objects into exchange values that establish the relative ranking of museums and galleries.

The curator mediates the social and the natural by proposing, first and foremost by placing objects in new relationships in exhibits, secondarily through writing, meaningful ways for observers to think about the object and by stimulating desire to find out more information about the object and deepen that meaning. Signs are powerful to the degree that they allow observers to see themselves and an object in a relationship that re-opens the history, as André Malraux put it *Voices of Silence*, of humanity's efforts to understand its tragic existence.²⁶ The ideal museum existed, Malraux concluded, only within the imagination. Whenever museum goers looked at a work they imbued it with the content of the thousands of works that were located in other locations or had been lost. The discrepancy between actual museums and the idealized heritage they invoked had not bothered most museum visitors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because they were educated in the inescapable dichotomy of reality and appearance. A cultured man or woman saw through the accident of whatever was immediate to gain a glimpse, to form an

²⁶ André Malraux, *La Musée imaginaire*, translated into English as *The Voices of Silence: Man and His Art* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1953).

understanding, of the eternal forms that made what ever appeared before us meaningful. From this stemmed the idea that great work was innately imbued with a “quality” essential to *wisdom*. Culture in the twentieth century, with new industrial forms for reproduction of art and dissemination of images, faced an unprecedented situation. The singular object-based work of painting and sculpture was being drawn into an economy increasingly based on circulation of images, which is another way to say of ideas.²⁷

Painting, he argued, was a medium poorly suited for the new age. If there were classical antecedents to the dilemmas facing twentieth-century cultural producers, they were the stained-glass windows of the middle ages and the mosaics of the ancient and byzantine civilizations. Malraux thought it significant that the whole of the windows of a medieval cathedral such as at Chartres can never be taken in all at the same time, not even cursorily. Visitors have to imagine the whole, while focusing in on specific panels, or more likely even, specific images within panels. Instead of the eye dominating what it takes in, the essential myth of perspective painting, the eye was the gateway for an open-ended relationship between people and the visible world. Malraux called this “the return of the visual,” which is itself always a fragment of larger system of human response: emotive, decorative, narrative, designed; a sign of a larger realm, infinite or least unbounded. System is the condition that allows fragments to take on meaning and interest. The role of artists therefore was to explore the world by imagining the different systems that could be used for interpretation. The exchange of imaginary museums would

²⁷ Malraux, *Voices of Silence*, 124, 630.

become a central aspect of contemporary “poetry,” and objects would become mere curiosities, to be preserved but not given any importance in a continuous exchange of personalizing visions.

As we know, the privileged status of objects and the institutions that safeguarded them prevailed through the last part of the twentieth century. The “art world,” that is to say the institutions that have grown over the past fifty years, has proven capable of absorbing the work of artists who refused even to make objects. Documents of planning and implementation have demonstrated a strong resale value that allows them to be objectified and then stored in museums, whose rationale remains the collection of a limited number of singular objects that are supposed to be seen in their original form. The triumph of the object may have been momentary, given that new modes of communication have developed over the last half century that are transforming how the world is experienced in ways consistent with Malraux’s vision of the future.

-4-

Directors and curators interviewed for the SFMOMA project were asked to talk in detail about individual works in the collection, both masterpieces and personal favorites. They were urged to discuss in some detail the values that they perceived in the work and why they personally enjoyed the piece they selected. Clear generational identifications emerged from these discussions. Every interviewee chose as examples of particularly important personal favorites objects first engaged when in his or her twenties or thirties. In this section of the interviews,

the narrators expressed the continuing joy they found in shapes, colors, media that had moved them profoundly as young people just starting out their careers. The exchanges took narrators back to their first jobs, to initial aspirations and ambitions, to hectic times when they worked long hours at impossibly busy, low paid jobs, but still had energy to spend every waking moment with extended networks of young artist, critics, and curators who were their closest friends. Madeleine Grynsztejn, curator of painting and sculpture in the first decade of the twenty-first century, observed that those who dedicate themselves to the art of their own lifetime turn into human Geiger counters whose responses registered the passions of the moment. They believed then, and still hope, that objects and events that were most exciting personally would prove to be the work that continued affecting others for generations to come. But then she confessed that when she was in her twenties working in New York City during the 1980s, she hoped that the art she loved most would disappear completely, that it might be destroyed even. The important thing had been the way an object had expressed ideas a moment that nobody could possibly understand that if they had not actually been there.²⁸

Curators working in new media, photography, and design needed to assert the value of the work they had brought into the collection despite the shift in collection emphasis after the end of the 1980s towards blue chip painting and

²⁸ Madeleine Grynsztejn, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Madeleine Grynsztejn, Curator of Painting and Sculpture," interviewed 2008 by Richard Cándida Smith and Lisa Rubens (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 02-00:14:38. Her comments were developed further by Robert Riley in his interview, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Robert Riley, Curator of Media Arts," interviewed 2009 by Richard Cándida Smith (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 03-00:57:29.

sculpture, and they had to deal with a not always hidden presumption that the objects they worked with, being less expensive, could not have quality equal to the best paintings in the collection. Sandra Phillips, the chief photography curator, responded to the shift with adventuresome thematic shows that demonstrated the wealth of work at the museum's disposal for making unusual statements about economic development in the west, newspaper reporting, surveillance as a cultural category, juxtaposing work by famous photographers with vernacular images usually not considered art to emphasize that it is the "psychological load" that makes some photographs particularly powerful. Aaron Betsky, curator of architecture and design in the 1990s, observed that he used the apparatus of a museum to force people to see the objects he collected in totally new ways:

It's all in something that we see every day, that we use every day, that most of us don't notice. And you put it on a pedestal, you put it in a gallery with white walls, you put a light on it, you put a guard near it, so that you know you can't touch it, and you are forced to look at it. And that's the most important thing that is accomplished, I think, by putting an object of design in an art museum. You look at it. Very simply. It does to that object what the art museum does to the Matisse and the Picasso. It builds this elaborate frame, from advertising to guards to value, and says, look at this. Stop. Turn off your cell phone or put it on vibrate, and just look. And that moment of looking is, for

me, crucial.²⁹

As curators discussed the future of modern/contemporary art museums, the still-emerging web-based culture was invoked as a challenge and a hope. New audiences, raised to appreciate virtuality rather than objectivity, might well be indifferent to objects as such, they might not share the values that made SFMOMA and many other museums grow so rapidly after 1960. This sense that their work had occurred during a special moment that might be slipping away was followed in several interviews by a hope that object-centered institutions might just fade away, a hope that echoed much of what Malraux had predicted in the 1950s would occur as a new culture of easily circulated images took hold. I heard visions of a new world where curators would only occasionally hang work in a gallery, but instead spend most of their time in a studio assembling images, recombining them in unexpected ways, and sending them out to the computers of the world in a continuous stream of programming. For Madeleine Grynsztejn, new technologies were transforming the basis of how modern and contemporary art museums had developed, and the danger was that no one had yet figured out how to synthesize the best of an older object orientation so that what museums had accomplished could be preserved for a world with very different practicalities guiding how people interacted with images and objects:

²⁹ Aaron Betsky, "SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Aaron Betsky, SFMOMA Curator of Architecture and Design," interviewed 2009 by Richard Cándida Smith and Jill Sterrett (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 01-00:15:46

The ground is changing from under the museum's feet, and it has to acclimate to a twenty-first-century position. It is in the process of still getting out of a nineteenth-century originary model, which was, grossly speaking, two pronged. Object centered. Out of that, we have inherited a continued obsession with owning what we're showing, acquiring. Acquiring masterpieces. Those two things are increasingly under threat, because we can afford fewer and fewer of those masterpieces. The very concept of masterpiece is also under question. The second prong that drove the originary model at museums is a social Darwinism; that if you went to the museum, you would become a better person. So you will receive this information from on high, and you will evolve. This model has sustained, *shockingly*, up until now. I mean, a hundred years, up until the end of the eighties. It's only in the nineties, it's only really, I think, in the last fifteen years, that a new museology has begun to infiltrate and be listened to, that is demanding that the museum be more responsive to an increasingly varied public, with an increasingly varied education, and that it be less object centered. The latter which, by the way, I disagree with. I think we still need to be object centered, but I think we need to be real about how the notion of the masterpiece has changed, and what we can achieve. ... Maybe we need to establish a model of lending libraries, the museum as a lending library. Maybe we don't need to

worry so much about who owns what.³⁰

If a work of art has no meaning inherent to its object status, it is only as interesting as the responses that it generates; it is only as interesting as the people who enter the circuit emanating from a work. The value of a work of art therefore lies entirely in the intellectual caliber of the people who have decided to comment upon it. The community of viewers, not the artist, transforms an object into a work of art through the words that communities use to constitute themselves. For institutions built around the uniqueness of each object, whose autonomy allows them to keep speaking, the vision of a world where cultural exchange occurs continually and freely among the members of a community, is difficult and threatening, even if at another level, it is held that successful art generates a continuous circuit of responses. For those whose training, talent, and imagination have been dedicated to objects, the concept of innate quality has been hard to let go for without it, or some analogue like the “object itself,” autonomy is lost, despite the defenses provided by critical language and the force of money.

In his last published work, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé proposed that every thought is a roll of the dice, not like a roll of the dice, but actually a gamble that brings into a sight another way of being in the world. Every thought is a proposition about what the relationship is between “me” and everything else. “As if” is the only law revealed since every statement is unique and something will emerge

³⁰ Grynstejn, “SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Madeleine Grynstejn,” 02-00:22:03 through 02-00:24:41.

momentarily to take its place. Every thought is the kernel for a new mind, which, if it shoots out roots, becomes a new form of life. Most do not because most propositions cannot pass the test of leading to a life that would be better or, more tragically, are not in the realm of possibility given the conditions of the moment. This suggests that artistic exploration is no utopia, but merely, as Mallarmé frequently insisted, a place where laughter rules. The “as if” is almost always a ridiculous proposition, which is not to say unhappy or worthless. We return to the absence that poetry invokes, the absence of the absolute, the explanation that will remain a secret, Every manifestation must vanish so that it cannot be confused for that which is and must be absent, pushing the mind always forward in a search for a way to grasp what is ineffable. As Mallarmé put it, “Nothing will have taken place except the place.” The future that emerges from activity must remain, by its very nature as a permanent absence from the present (an absence can never be a presence, though it can be felt and intuited), unclear, a supposition, a guess, a preference. When we endow our desire for a specific future with the shape of certainty, as if there were a law assuring the permanence of our guess, we lose whatever hold on the present we have, for we have created an absence that is false, hence a form of perdition. In terms of art, every new development will appear as a “half-art” or an “almost-art” “what merely verges on art.”³¹ Voices will protest the

³¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, preface to “Un coup des dés,” in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Harry Weinfeld (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 122. For analysis of Mallarmé’s work as an effort to replace ontological conceptions of consciousness and cosmology with fluid semiotic systems, see Laurent Jenny, *La fin de l’interiorité: Théorie de l’expression et invention esthétique dans les avant-gardes françaises (1885-1935)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 2002) and Richard Cándida Smith, *Mallarmé’s Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

absence of what made art emotionally powerful in their day, but the “almost” turns into “certainly.” Mallarmé imagined quality as a state of excitement that that which has been absent will be become present. One will write a book that will clarify some topic. One will curate a show that will change those who see it. One will turn a local cultural center with limited resources into a global institution. None of it may ever take place, no dreams ever take place as anticipated even when successful, but the anticipation sustains work and generates support, both moral and material. All that may take place is a conviction that one’s work is meaningful, not just because it has provided one with a life, but because it has changed others as well, even if they do not recognize it yet.