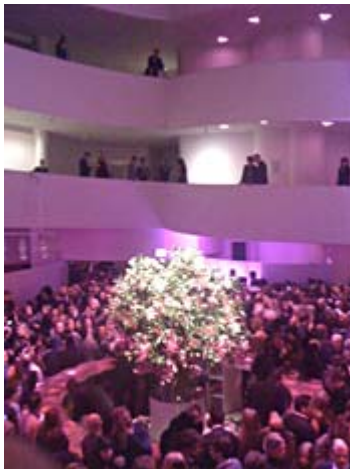




Morning in the Giardini for the Venice Biennale 2009



The Guggenheim rotunda during the Hugo Boss Prize ceremony, 2010



Art Basel Miami Beach, 2009

BEYOND THE ART WORLD

by Ben Davis

I do not like the term "art world." It's a useful term, of course, a kind of shorthand for something like "the professional sphere of the visual arts." "The art world thinks. . ." "Art-world concerns. . ." Etcetera. But the truth is, art is not a world unto itself. Art is *part* of the world. And that fact has to be a fundamental starting point for everything.

It is not my goal to become an "art person." For some people, being an "art person" is their main ambition. Paradoxically, when I talk to such people, I quickly become confused about why they are interested in art. They are interested in art as a world, I guess, as an environment to inhabit: for the parties, the people, the gossip, the money, the vague and ill-defined aura of intelligence and importance that art gives off.

Art is a complex social act, and one of the primary passions. Perhaps not so primary as food, or love, or sex, or shelter -- but very important. People will suffer for art, for a shot at creative self-expression. Nevertheless, art cannot and does not exist on its own, and slipping into the habit of addressing the sphere of the visual arts as a self-enclosed universe is a recipe for sapping art of its social vitality.

The movement of art and art criticism, as I have come to see it, is a movement of threading, of finding the points where art and its world connect back to everything else, the big, beautiful, sometimes fucked up and scary world beyond it. If you can't stomach being interested in the wider world and having a thought about it, and figuring out how that relates back to what artists are doing in the present, then all you are left with is meaningless professional opinion, of interest mainly to other art professionals or those in their spell.

To say you should approach art politically is not necessarily the same as demanding that art be political. In fact, quite often the sterile imperative to make "political art" is just a kind of inverted expression of art-world solipsism. To whom is political art addressed? "Art people?" One mark of the insularity of the visual arts these days is that art mainly becomes part of the larger political conversation in a negative way, at those moments where some exhibition comes under fire from conservatives.

We are all creative people, we all have art in our blood. But statements of the **Joseph Beuys**, "everyone is an artist" type are totally idealist in the negative, philosophical sense, skipping over the physical realities of our lives in favor of a pat intellectual formula. Of course we can all go home and make art in the privacy of our own homes, or even just declare our every action art, if we so choose. But to become an "artist" in any serious way requires the acclaim of other people. And this, in turn, requires that one plug into a larger discussion, on at least two different levels:

* First, an artwork must connect with an audience's understanding of what "art" is in society today, which is just a tissue of topical conventions and historical precedents. On this level, what is thought



Moving paintings during Art Basel Miami Beach, 2009



Boats in the water during Venice Biennale 2009



Somewhere at the Venice Biennale 2009



Enjoying the art during "No Soul For Sale" at X-Initiative, 2009



The "Valuations" desk/coat check at Christie's during "Multiplied" art fair, 2010

to be good art is indeed determined mainly by intra-art-world concerns -- I think of this as the "horizontal" level of analysis, because it is just connecting one art reference up with other art references, in an endless plane. Much present-day criticism stops at this level, of assessing whether something is original or derivative in relation to the accepted battery of art conventions. Hence, you get a lot of formulae to the effect of, "such and such an artwork is like **Marcel Duchamp-meets-Thomas Kinkadee**."

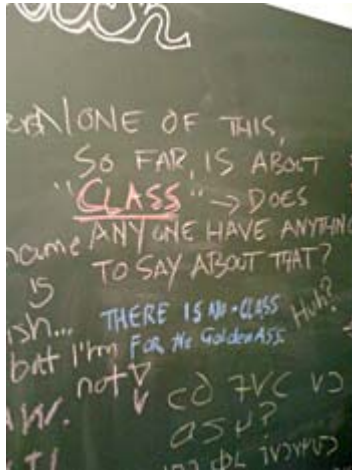
* But secondly, there is the vertical level of reference: The way a particular artistic gesture is rooted in the earth of its social present, the energies and forces of the world that surround it. To feel truly passionate about a work of art means connecting it up, consciously or unconsciously, to a way of thinking, an existential world, a social reality. That is why a particular art gesture at one historical moment can seem heroic, while at another, the same gesture might seem cheap. At one instant, it is a symbol of daring and innovation, relating to the social outlook of freaks and eccentrics; at another, it becomes associated with the preachings of professors and the shenanigans of ad men.

Writing about the Bauhaus earlier this year, I **said** that an art critic has "to put the history back into art history" to make sense of it. This is true of the present as well as of the past: You must make contemporary art feel truly contemporary, part of the present and not removed from it.

As I look back on what I have written about art, I find that the exhibitions and artworks that I have thought hardest about or loved the most almost all spring from the intersection of these two levels -- they are concerned, in sometimes conflicted but always definite ways, with finding places where the "art world" might transcend itself, might aspire to be more than just a collection of well-spoken professionals. To be something that matters. This is true of **Trevor Paglen's** tortured, weird, weirdly beautiful **voyages into the world of surveillance**; of **Abbas Kiarostami's** photos, which draw their strength from their **lonely, cosmopolitan self-consciousness**; of the **social energy and lovable pageantry** of the Flux Factory collective; of Massimiliano Gioni's **ambitious and elegiac Gwangju Biennale**.

The specter of the "art world" casts a mesmeric spell upon creative discussion, constantly absorbs new things into its professional orbit, and sets all kinds of bad examples because, of course, those who succeed are not necessarily the best artists, or writers -- merely the best "art people." But the "art world" is not some all-consuming "society of the spectacle" that has come to foreclose any possibility of critical thought or real artistic passion. It is, at most, a theater for people's professional aspirations, a stage that serious artists pass through and then transcend. When you have learned its terms and then learned not to care about it, you have achieved a kind of state of grace, and that is where good art begins.

BEN DAVIS was associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*, 2005-2010.



Musings on chalkboard during Jennifer Dalton & William Powhida's "#class" show at Winkleman Gallery, 2010



Visitors underneath Leandro Erlich's *Swimming Pool* installation at PS1, 2009