

## Chapter 1

# Connoisseurship and Critique

What are we actually talking about when we talk about art? What kind of social energies does it encode? What are its capacities and what are its limits? These are basic questions, and yet strangely difficult to answer in a straightforward way. It is almost as if “art,” as a field, is committed to not yielding up simple answers.

At a minimum, a fan of contemporary art will be someone who enjoys spotting the telltale signs and styles of artists and accumulating and exercising knowledge about them. Without knowing anything else, such a disposition suggests a way of looking that is deliberately defined by setting itself off against others as more informed and more invested—a fact that connects it to a whole range of implicit questions about status, education, and class. The investment in educated looking can lead equally to an open-hearted curiosity about the many unexpected ways that creativity manifests or to a close-minded cultivation of arbitrary cultural distinctions.

Trying to navigate this terrain, I’ve gone back to questions of taste and distinction, and how they have been enmeshed with the development of our unequal and rapaciously alienating capitalist society. I realize that writing an essay on Marxism and connoisseurship probably seems something like writing a Marxist theory of dressage. Yet when it comes to the posturing around art, discussions about claiming its apparatus of prestige, on the one hand, or rejecting its culture of entitlement, on the other, still take up a lot of bandwidth. These questions even have a political (or at least proto-political) dimension,

in terms of what energies writing about art seeks to connect with—the gestures of rejecting snobbishness and obscurantism versus those of rejecting commercialization and anti-intellectualism speak to different kinds of grievances and connect with different senses of what is wrong with the world.

In art today, “connoisseurship” immediately evokes a kind of old-guard gatekeeping that is unfashionable—deep looking, an eye for subtle markers of historical merit, a commitment to fine-grained distinctions of quality, and an obsession with the signature traces of the unique artist. “No moment of the discipline’s history has been more reviled,” one scholarly article puts it. “Connoisseurship has become a byword for snobbery, greed, and professional mystification.”<sup>1</sup> Speaking at a conference on “The Educated Eye,” one British Museum curator put the matter even more starkly: “[I would] rather gouge my eyes out with a rusty penknife than describe myself as a connoisseur.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet the interesting thing is that, as art has fled from its historical association with connoisseurship, the very same virtues have experienced a boom in the culture beyond the gallery and the museum. Everywhere people have been encouraged to style themselves as discriminating consumers, possessed of obscure and specific knowledge about the objects they acquire. As if by magic, the recent past has conjured up entire new fields of connoisseurship.

One hundred years ago, when the classic connoisseurs of art like Bernard Berenson and Max Friedländer were at the height of their prestige, Henry Ford’s Model T had just introduced the automobile as the prototypical mass industrial product. In the new millennium, interest in collectible cars among moneyed baby boomers has been as fierce or fiercer than investment in traditional status symbols like art or wines. Symposia with titles like “Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car” promise the knowledge necessary to navigate this new terrain. “The car is always an assemblage,” advised one sage, “not just an object, but a bundle of stories, paperwork, contexts, as well as parts.”<sup>3</sup>

“I always call my cars ‘moveable’ art,” one collector said in 2019, “and I call sneakers ‘wearable’ or ‘walkable’ art.”<sup>4</sup>

The first Nike “Moon Shoe” was made in 1971, when Bill Bowerman had the inspiration to use a waffle iron to mold the sole. Turbocharging the market for sport shoes in the 1980s on the back of the jogging and aerobics craze and the nascent cool of hip-hop streetwear, Nike was the vanguard of outsourcing production to low-cost labor markets. The flip side of this was investing in branding and celebrity, starting with the success of Air Jordans and ultimately flowering into what has now become an intricate ecosystem of limited-edition shoe drops, along with a secondary market for shoes and streetwear that was worth more than \$2 billion in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Sneakerheads sustain an entire apparatus of occult knowledge, with its own hierarchies of discernment. As one sneaker expert explained (in an article actually arguing that the sneaker world had become too snobbish):

It’s not just enough to go out and buy the latest and coolest Nikes, Adidas, or Jordans, you have to know every single historical nugget about them, too. Who designed the shoe? When was it first released? How many pairs were made? Which celebrity wore them in an advertisement that was printed before you were born? All of that is viewed as requisite knowledge for anyone who wants to consider themselves a sneaker connoisseur or, better yet, label themselves with the dubious title of being a “sneakerhead.”<sup>6</sup>

As one “Sneaker Authenticator,” versed in the subtle signs of authenticity—from shoe smell to minute variations in stitching, labels, and dyes—told *GQ*: “Am I surprised [this is a job]? No. Maybe because I’m just into shoes, I’ve always known how deep the culture was.”<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, confusingly, as fine art labored mightily to distance itself from the elitist, gatekeeping connotations of connoisseurship, popular critics of art and academic theorists alike were united in disdain for what the post-connoisseur museum became in the 2010s. The *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter lamented that the crowds attracted to spectacular contemporary art exhibitions masked the

withering audience for anything that is not of the now.<sup>8</sup> Critic and theorist Hal Foster attacked contemporary museums for becoming little more than props for callow “cultural tourism” and caving to “a mega-programme so obvious that it goes unstated: entertainment.”<sup>9</sup>

The rejection of “connoisseurship” in recent art discourse may be seen simply as the pragmatic outcome of a much-changed contemporary art system. Eclecticism and pluralism are the chief features of the post-1960s art scene; the notion, associated with connoisseurship, of establishing a single firm set of rules for evaluation seems dated at best in a context when almost anything presented within the walls of an art gallery might be considered art. Yet the airy avowal that “anything can be art” masks the deeper, unexamined ways that, in diffused, disguised form, the ideology of “fine art” still structures how art is viewed and valued, even within the polyglot international art world.

### The Invention of “Art”

If this question forces us to start from a consideration of traditional European history, this is partly because European industrialization helped forge the contemporary world and European colonialism spread its cultural dilemmas far and wide. We still live in the cage of assumptions formed by this process, so the subject is still worth unpacking.

Among art historians, it is a commonplace that the idea of “fine art” is a relatively recent construction. Its roots lie in the humanism of the Italian Renaissance, the high status accorded to court painters in absolutist societies, and the rationalism of the Enlightenment. It was given further impetus by the formalization of Galilean science, which shook up old tables of knowledge. As Larry Shiner writes in *The Invention of Art*:

By joining the experimental and mathematical methods, seventeenth-century scientists not only laid the basis for the sciences to achieve an autonomous identity but also drove a wedge into the liberal arts, pushing geometry and astronomy towards disciplines like mechanics and physiology that seemed more

appropriate company than music, which was itself moving towards rhetoric and poetry.<sup>10</sup>

As for painting and sculpture, they could not have existed as art objects in the modern sense before the birth of the museum, which gave the necessary institutional context to view them outside of decoration and patronage. The founding of the Musée du Louvre in 1792 was one of the more unexpected by-products of the French Revolution. It was specifically meant to extract treasures associated with the royal family from their context—and to prevent them from being destroyed by angry sans-culottes. It then became the repository for imperial booty, extracted from conquered cultures and appreciated as trophies.

Yet the truly modern form of capital-A Art is a creation of the Romantic period in Europe (roughly the first half of the nineteenth century), which birthed the ideal of the artist as an independent, “autonomous” visionary. This cult of art emerged opposite the intensifying upheaval of the Industrial Revolution: small workshop production and small farms were being replaced by increasingly industrialized, urban forms of production and consumption. Laborers became anonymous and no longer had creative input into their work; consumers knew less and less about where or by whom goods had been produced.

Here’s Shiner again:

Whereas the eighteenth century split the older idea of art into fine art versus craft, the nineteenth century transformed fine art itself into a reified “Art,” an independent and privileged realm of spirit, truth, and creativity. Similarly, the concept of the artist, which had been definitively separated from that of the artisan in the eighteenth century, was now sanctified as one of humanity’s highest spiritual callings. The status and image of the artisan, by contrast, continued to decline, as many small workshops were forced out of business by industrialization and many skilled craftspeople entered the factories as operatives performing prescribed routines.<sup>11</sup>

In Europe, the most influential writers to give voice to the age's intensified artistic sensibility were Charles Baudelaire in France and John Ruskin in England. These writers would have been in the same high school class with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the theorists of socialism, which is no coincidence. The same factors that led to increasing awareness of the degrading contradictions of European society also led to an increasing hunger for alternative paths of aesthetic salvation. "There is no understanding the arts in the later nineteenth century," writes the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, "without a sense of this social demand that they should act as all-purpose suppliers of spiritual contents to the most materialist of civilizations."<sup>12</sup>

This position, in turn, gives art a troubling double status. Dave Beech sees art's "exceptional status" as an alternative to alienated labor within capitalist society as containing the germs of meaningful rebellion: "Art's historical hostility to handicraft specifically and work generally has operated according to a utopian logic of securing an island of worklessness within seven seas of drudgery."<sup>13</sup> Simon Gikandi, in contrast, emphasizes that, at the same time European cultures were building up a "culture of taste" that redeemed the grubby business of commerce and politics, they were submitting other peoples around the world to enslavement and colonization, in the name of Europe's civilizing mission. "There has been an intimate connection between a sense of cultural achievement and superiority and the practice of domination."<sup>14</sup>

The process by which cultural objects from non-European cultures were, as art historian Elaine O'Brien put it, "reimagined as 'art' in the modern sense of a product of individual expression meant for individual secular contemplation," has been extensively critiqued and studied.<sup>15</sup> Such values of art have sometimes been imposed on non-European cultures by the most sordid of imperialisms, displacing indigenous art forms. Yet the status invested in the "autonomous" artwork as a kind of alternative to modern pressures can't be seen purely as one-sided imposition either, at least not without overlooking the ways this status has been appropriated critically.

For example, following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a formerly cloistered Japan decided to industrialize on its own terms in reaction to the expansion of the empires of Europe and the United States. Art historian Dōshin Satō shows in his important book *Modern Japanese Art and the Meiji State* that the Japanese equivalent term for “fine art,” *bijutsu*, was consciously constructed by the modernizing Japanese government in this period of social transformation.<sup>16</sup> The field of *bijutsu*, Satō argues, elevated genres including painting and sculpture, which became associated with individual vision and the modification of tradition for the present, attracting members of the former samurai gentry who were looking to hold on to prestige as new economic relations eroded their old privileges. Meanwhile, another term, *kōgei*, approximating the idea of “craft,” absorbed the remaining artisanal handicrafts and became associated with the new export economy servicing the West’s hunger for *Japonisme*—and therefore with alienated labor and a lower status.<sup>17</sup> A self-conscious ideology of “art” is, it seems, as characteristic a symptom of the implantation of capitalism as wage labor or the commodity form itself.

If European colonial plunder offers the gravest examples of cultural forms being stripped of links to traditional community by domination and commodification, anticolonial thought offers some of the strongest counterexamples of how the figure of the independent artist could be claimed critically. In *Postcolonial Modernism*, art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu firmly rebukes the convention of seeing Nigerian artists who adopted easel painting and European-derived styles of art as victims of cultural imperialism.

Indeed, he argues, it was British colonial administrators like the educator and archeologist Kenneth Murray who advocated that Nigerians should focus on learning traditional handicrafts. In contrast, figures such as the painter Aina Onabolu, one of the progenitors of Nigerian modernism, self-consciously claimed the status of artist as a way to assert “an African modern subjectivity defined primarily by their own need for self-assertion and their visions of political and cultural autonomy.”<sup>18</sup> The independent artist was seen as a modern figure. Seizing its status was felt to be part of Nigerian intellectuals’

claiming modernization and independence against an empire that wanted to keep them underdeveloped and dependent.

A very similar drama played out in India, according to Osman Jamal. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was a colonial administrator, E. B. Havell, who insisted on teaching the traditional craft practices to the empire's Indian subjects instead of European academic art practice. He believed that this would be a way to stanch unrest, taking the edge off the spiritual alienation caused by the cultural disruptions associated with British rule. Havell was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement in England, which believed that a return to the communal style of European medieval art was the antidote to both industrial squalor and the dandyish affectations of Victorian culture. From Havell's curriculum at Calcutta School of Art, the renewal of the teaching of Indian traditional practices spread widely to become a major cultural movement in the early part of the twentieth century. Ironically, this artistic ideology, meant to stabilize British rule, informed Gandhi's independence movement, which looked to village craft production and tradition as the source of an alternative identity opposed to Britain's industrial empire.<sup>19</sup>

Even so, Bengali writer and artist Rabindranath Tagore, who also played a notable role in the independence movement,<sup>20</sup> rejected this romanticization of craft as patronizing in his 1926 lecture "Art and Tradition." He argued that associating "Indianness" with tradition amounted to denying Indians status as modern subjects. "I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligations to produce something that can be labelled as Indian Art, according to some old world mannerism." Artists should claim their status as individuals. "Art," Tagore wrote, "is personal."<sup>21</sup>

A final, intermediate case might further clarify the stakes of art's shifting relation to labor, prestige, and individual personality: the career of Edmonia Lewis. Born in the United States in 1844 to a free African American father and a Native American mother, she became an internationally celebrated artist in the nineteenth century, eventually moving to Rome with the hope of pursuing an independent career as a sculptor, working in a neoclassical style. "I was prac-

tically driven to Rome, in order to obtain the opportunities for art culture, and to find a social atmosphere where I was not constantly reminded of my color," she told the *New York Times* in 1878. "The land of liberty had no room for a colored sculptor."<sup>22</sup>

She became famous for sculptures celebrating Emancipation and exploring narratives about Native peoples, mostly done as commissions. Reviewers were fascinated and obsessed with highlighting her racial identity; she, in turn, labored to be appreciated for the excellence of her craft rather than for the novelty of who she was, insisting on maintaining a careful barrier between the subjects of her sculptural work and any explicit connection to her personal story. Art historian Kirsten P. Buick writes that Lewis's self-conscious desire to forestall autobiographical associations accounts for the troubling fact that her female figures uniformly have European features, even when they are meant to represent Black or Native women: "Lewis remains a presence that is absent in her work: she is present as an 'artist,' as the creator of art, but she is absent as the 'subject' or 'object' of her art."<sup>23</sup>

In a curious way, the pronounced obsession of Edmonia Lewis's reviewers with reading her works through the lens of her personal biography rather than evaluating them as technically skilled pieces of neoclassical sculpture made her a very modern type of artist indeed, in a period when Romantic ideas about art as heroic self-expression were still congealing in the United States. At the same time, Lewis was barred from fully claiming this position, both by nineteenth-century racism and the conventions of her chosen type of art practice.

## Destructive Criticism

The modern connoisseur is also a historical product, born from the same intellectual ferment that produced the modern artist. The two figures are entwined. The formalization of the ideals of connoisseurship legitimated art as a prestige area of production.

The same nineteenth century that gave rise to the cult of the autonomous artist witnessed, within theories of connoisseurship, a

parallel development: an increasingly monomaniacal focus on questions of authorship. In Europe, the key figure is the Italian physician, statesman, and theorist Giovanni Morelli—like Baudelaire and Ruskin, the near-exact contemporary of Marx and Engels.

For earlier proponents of “scientific connoisseurship,” attribution of the work to a particular artist was one task among others. For Morelli, attribution became the main obsession—to the point of paradox. All that was most obvious in a painting was liable to be copied by lesser hands. The true personality of the artist, therefore, would reveal itself in overlooked, almost unconscious details, such as the uniquely characteristic way that a hand or an earlobe was rendered. True art appreciation could only mean looking past the “general impression” and seeking out these minute traces of creative individuality.

It bears noting that Morelli’s connoisseurship dovetailed with a nationalist political project. He fought in the uprisings of 1848 that would eventually lead to Italian unification, and in 1861 was elected as senator to the first national Italian Parliament. National unity meant creating the idea of an agreed-upon culture, which, in turn, meant ordering the national collections, separating treasures from fakes and copies. Because of Morelli’s spectacular success in using his aesthetic forensics to challenge and reattribute famous paintings, he gained great renown in the late nineteenth century. Yet despite the seemingly technical nature of his endeavor, it is worth emphasizing the degree to which Morelli’s obsession with authorship was not just a method of attribution but a particularly modern form of taste.

In his treatise *Italian Painters* (1890), Morelli’s “Principles and Method” are outlined in the form of a parable: an imagined encounter between a Russian visitor to Florence and a wise older Italian connoisseur. After hearing the Italian hold forth on authentication issues, the Russian departs, thinking him “dry, uninteresting, and even pedantic,” and concluding that his theories “might even be of service to dealers and experts, but in the end must prove detrimental to the truer and more elevated conception of art.”<sup>24</sup> Returning to Russia, however, the narrator finds himself haunted by the encoun-

ter. He attends a showcase of a prince's Italian pictures before they are sold off at auction. "I could hardly believe my eyes and felt as if scales had suddenly fallen from them," our narrator tells the reader. "In short, these pictures, which only a few years before had appeared to me admirable works by Raphael himself, did not satisfy me now, and on closer inspection I felt convinced that these much-vaunted productions were nothing but copies, or perhaps even counterfeits."<sup>25</sup>

Morelli suggests the term "destructive criticism" for his method. The superficial appreciation of art is destroyed; in its place, a new, ultra-refined appreciation is recovered at a higher level.

Undergirding this aesthetics is a subtle politics of looking. On the one hand, the traditional elitism of connoisseurship is on full view in Morelli's text, with his proxy stating that "the full enjoyment of art is reserved only for a select few, and that the many cannot be expected to enter into all the subtleties."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, this aristocratic temperament is not just rooted in the past but could very well represent a reaction to a quite modern phenomenon: the commercialization of culture. Indeed, the evils Morelli associates with the "general impression" are conveyed in part by a metaphorical figure who will be familiar within contemporary debates about the transformation of museum culture: the tourist. "The modern tourist's first object is to arrive at a certain point; once there, he disposes of the allotted sights as quickly as possible, and hurries on resignedly to fresh fields, where the same programme is repeated," remarks Morelli's Italian connoisseur, almost as his opening statement. "In the way we live nowadays, a man has scarcely time to collect his thoughts. The events of each day glide past like dissolving views, effacing one another in turn. There is thus a total absence of repose, without which enjoyment of art is an impossibility."<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, the "destructive" aspects of Morelli's criticism can be read as a defensive operation, as old rhythms of culture were being subordinated to the demands of modern commerce. If the cult of art was developed as a reaction to intensifying alienation of labor and life, the *connoisseur of images* was constructed as the counterpoint to the mere *consumer of images*.

## The Connoisseur Paradox

The intellectual implications of such “scientific connoisseurship” become clearer still when we come to Morelli’s most celebrated follower, Bernard Berenson, who formalized the “Morellian Method” into a legitimating philosophy for the art market of the Gilded Age.

Berenson systematized Morelli’s approach and further established the new idea of recognizing “artistic personality” as the highest aim of aesthetic intelligence. Art historian Carol Gibson-Wood explains the method: “The complete description of an artistic personality amounts to identifying an artist’s characteristic habits of execution and visualization, noting their changes, deducing from them the ways in which other masters influenced this artist, and finally commenting upon his qualities of mind and temperament, as evidenced by his paintings.”<sup>28</sup>

The near-religious charge of this strain of art connoisseurship took on a particular meaning at the time. Notably, this description of the highest duty of art appreciation stands out as a celebration of qualities—a sense of the specific conditions of production and the aura of the humanity behind the object—that were being lost in the transition to alienated consumption, as the latter nineteenth century made the urban department store, the mail order catalog, and an explosion of “new and improved” goods central features of modern life.

At the same time, what also becomes clear from reviewing Berenson’s methodological treatise, *Rudiments of Connoisseurship* (1898), is just how oddly the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century obsession with authorship fit its particular privileged object: Italian Renaissance art. Renaissance painting and sculpture had emerged out of the transition from Europe’s medieval world, with its workshops and guilds, well before the actuation of Romanticism’s ideal of the independent artist. “The artist often left most of the work, if not the whole, to be executed by assistants, unless a special agreement was made that it was entirely or in its most important features, to be from his own hand, although even then he did not always adhere to the terms of his contract,” cautioned Berenson, explaining

the difficulty of arriving at true knowledge of authorship. Referring to a Raphael that had been downgraded to "Workshop of Raphael," he writes: "Often there could have been no pretense at execution on the great master's part. Everything painted in his shop was regarded as his work, even when wholly executed and even when designed by his assistants."<sup>29</sup> The idea of sorting the real Raphaels, expressing the master's distinct personality, from the derivative ones essentially involved constructing an idea of artistic authenticity that Raphael himself did not have, creating a layer of appreciation that had little to do with the kinds of visual pleasures and symbolic tasks that originally governed the creation of these objects.<sup>30</sup>

The projective character of Berenson's hunt for the signs of "artistic personality" within and between works may recall what sociologist Michel Foucault says about how the "author function" in literature operates. In his 1969 lecture "What Is an Author?" Foucault argued that authorship was not a given but merely one historical mode of reception:

Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. . . . The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author's name, that one can say "this was written by so-and-so" or "so-and-so is its author," shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.<sup>31</sup>

Foucault's interest in the author function is principally epistemological. Yet even in this passage, the French philosopher hints at how it fulfills an aesthetic function: it serves to differentiate its objects from the "immediately consumable," granting them a "certain status," and setting them off from the oblivion of anonymous "everyday" production. The form of artistic consciousness propounded by

Morelli and Berenson might, finally, be thought of as “the delectation of the author function”: the pleasure one gets from putting one’s knowledge of an “artistic personality” to work.

## The Ready-Made Eye

If there is one artwork of the twentieth century that would make the connoisseur’s obsession with the “hand of the master” appear antique, it is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 (the same year, it so happens, that Berenson’s *Study and Criticism of Italian Art* appeared in the United States). The lasting provocation of this appropriated urinal, presented as sculpture, stands at the foundation of contemporary art’s post-medium pluralism. Yet it is a much remarked upon irony that the original *Fountain*, which was lost, was replicated in 1950 and 1963 with Duchamp’s supervision of all the details. This quintessential celebration of the industrial object in art became, essentially, a precious trophy, carefully constructed to display, if not the “hand of the master,” then definitely evidence of a unique artistic vision.

The Fordist assembly line had only kicked off in 1913, the same year Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* appeared in New York. An industrial and consumerist world would make new kinds of objects available for repurposing as artistic expression, via collage or mining the pathos of the found object. Such emergent strategies would throw into question many assumptions about what fine art looked like.

Yet in some ways, rather than representing a break, the changes *Fountain* signaled actually consummated the internal logic already put in play by “scientific connoisseurship.” Duchamp famously professed himself indifferent to “retinal art”—works whose appeal was visual. Meanwhile, Morelli’s “destructive criticism” had already opposed itself to “superficial impression” and turned art appreciation into a cerebral guessing game, centered on questions of authorship.

In its day, Duchamp’s *Fountain* remained a novelty, if not an outrage. Its influence would not be truly ascendant until the 1960s in

the United States, when rising pop and conceptual artists discovered in the "ready-made" a legitimating tradition. It is yet another historical irony that, just as industrial materials were entering into the mainstream of fine art, conventions of fine art were accumulating around the quintessential industrialized art form: Hollywood film.

Directed at a mass audience and subject to Taylorized production procedures, individual authorship was so little important to Hollywood's Golden Age from the 1920s to the 1940s that the term "genius of the system" has come into currency to indicate how the corporation itself, through the studio system, fulfilled the role of author. Yet by the 1960s, film would become recuperated under "auteur theory" in the writings of figures like André Bazin, establishing the medium as an object for serious intellectual attention rather than a disposable novelty. Critic-turned-filmmaker François Truffaut's book of interviews with Alfred Hitchcock reoriented public perception of the British director from a flashy hired gun to an artist whose oeuvre displayed a unified personal vision.

"Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature," another proponent of auteur theory, Andrew Sarris, would write in 1962, sounding for all the world like Berenson holding forth on "artistic personality" in painting. "The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels."<sup>32</sup> The same conceptual apparatus that could reach back in time to transform Raphael in his Renaissance workshop into an autonomous visionary could transform Hitchcock, working for Paramount, into his distant cousin: Hitchcock the Auteur.<sup>33</sup>

## No Quarter

In the final paragraphs of "What Is an Author?" Foucault offers what amounts to a literary prophecy. Associating the author function with "our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property," he hypothesizes that "as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author func-

tion will disappear.”<sup>34</sup> Written amid the aftershocks of the political earthquake of May '68, the French theorist seemed to be implying that true social revolution would correspond with the toppling of the “author function.” What is puzzling about the formulation is that, outside the boutique world of the fine arts and the academy, plenty of texts already fulfilled this post-authorial condition—indeed, the ones that most natively reflected the ideology of “industrial and bourgeois society.”

“The words which dominated Western consumer societies were no longer the words of holy books, let alone of secular writers, but the brand-names of goods or whatever else could be bought,” wrote historian Eric Hobsbawm of the cultural transformations of the 1960s and after. The same could be said of the world of images, of which museum and gallery art, with its byzantine intellectual concerns, could only form a subordinate part. “From the 1960s on the images which accompanied human beings in the Western world—and increasingly in the urbanized Third World—from birth to death were those advertising or embodying consumption or dedicated to commercial mass entertainment,” Hobsbawm continued. “Compared to these the impact of the ‘high arts’ on even the most ‘cultured’ was occasional at best.”<sup>35</sup> For its target audience, neither advertising nor the average episode of TV is meant to be appreciated, except in rare cases, as the product of a particular subjectivity or as part of an authored body of work.

On balance, locating “bourgeois” values with either authored or unauthored work is futile. Both tendencies exist within capital, which on the one hand transforms everything into equally exchangeable units, but on the other reintroduces distinction in the hunt for the kinds of “monopoly rents” that only unique status symbols can provide. As Marxist theorist David Harvey has written, this restless dynamic of capital “leads to the valuation of uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, originality, and all manner of other dimensions to social life that are inconsistent with the homogeneity presupposed by commodity production.”<sup>36</sup>

If connoisseurship seems to have an unsettled status within contemporary culture, it is because it is caught in these crosswinds.

Since production and reception assume one another but are distinct, we can create a matrix of the possible intersection of our terms:

		Subject	
		Connoisseur	Consumer
Object	Art	1	2
	Industry	4	3

Quadrant 1 represents the situation in which aesthetic objects designed to be read according to the conventions of fine art meet an audience primed to receive them. The best image here is the art lover happily nested in the art museum.

Quadrant 2 represents these same types of fine art objects read in a non-connoisseurly way. The image that comes to mind is tourists flowing through the Uffizi in Morelli's nightmares or multitudes lining up to snap a picture of the *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre because of its media-icon status.<sup>37</sup>

Quadrant 3 takes us into the world of commodity culture as it meets its target consumer. For the casual viewer looking for something suitably distracting while grazing on Netflix, no less than the car buyer looking to balance design with gas mileage, what the cultural object says about its maker or context of production are not the most important factors at play.

Quadrant 4, at last, stands for the situation in which products originally meant to be received outside of any special apparatus of connoisseurship are recuperated: Hollywood film sublimated via auteur theory; sneakers transfigured via sneaker appreciation.

The argument I'm making is that the divisions that form this matrix reflect the way that culture refracts the alienation and class stratification characteristic of a capitalist, divided society. Given these roots in political economy, it should be no surprise that at different times and places, pressing the merits of any of these four quadrants over the others has taken the appearance of political critique.

Thus, in what can be described as a kind of Marxist connoisseurship, appreciation of individually invested artistic labor has sometimes stood as a symbol for the possibilities of unalienated work (Quadrant 1).<sup>38</sup> At other moments, unmasking fine art's pretensions as the product of class privilege has been the key vector of critique (Quadrant 2).<sup>39</sup> In the early twentieth century, subordinating the individual, bourgeois values of art to industry with the idea of producing "art for all" rather than luxury goods for an elite took on a socialist cast in Soviet productivism and the Bauhaus (Quadrant 3). At other times, recovering the humanity and individual creativity hidden behind objects viewed as work for hire, as design, or as "mere commodities" might well have its own polemical charge (Quadrant 4).<sup>40</sup>

Referring to the poles of fine and mass art, the philosopher Theodor Adorno wrote, "Both bear the elements of capitalism, both bear the elements of change. . . . Both are the torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up."<sup>41</sup> Extending the thought, you could say that all four quadrants of this matrix are torn parts of an integral freedom, to which they, nevertheless, do not add up.

What seems characteristic of the recent moment is the intensification of the confusion between the different positions. A rapacious contemporary capitalism relentlessly seeks to build up spaces of nouveau-snobbery and privilege while also despoiling and profaning old spaces of solace. And it's important to represent that this happens simultaneously. One of the operations of power is to deflect the critique of capitalism onto the terrain of a more limited cultural critique. Condemnations of arrogant elitism or dumbed-down consumerism, of the detached art object or the degraded commodity form, have value. Each has in its own way been a significant channel

for frustration. But being partial, such critiques are always in danger of redirecting political questions into questions of taste. In the end, you have to keep your sights on transforming the system that produced such contradictions in the first place.