

AN ETHICS

Putting Aesthetic Transmission
in Its Proper Place in the Art World

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How is art in a given society transmitted from one generation of artists to another? Art schools have not always existed, and nothing says that they must always exist. In a way, they already no longer exist. Their proliferation is perhaps a trompe l'oeil, masking the fact that the transmission of art today from artist to artist is very far from occurring directly in schools. On the contrary, it travels through extremely complex channels that end up

implicating the collective as a whole. In fact, we are living in a society (1) where the profession of the artist (unlike that of the architect) is not protected, and anyone can try to become known as an artist without necessarily having attended an institution that grants a diploma; (2) where museums—public institutions not reserved for professionals—are the principal tools of the transmission of the patrimony and direct the way the public will be exposed to art; (3) where the diffusion of living art is shared in more or less equal parts between museums and centers of contemporary art in the public sector, along with art galleries and foundations that are products of the private sector but make art accessible to all; (4) where viewing contemporary art with any frequency requires a specialized, sophisticated, and highly intellectual background; (5) where an enormous part of this art culture is transmitted (with varying degrees of vulgarization) through specialized journals, catalogues, books, and mediums in general, which come from the private sector for the most part, with relatively little transmitted through educational institutions; and (6) where the technical aspect of the artistic apprenticeship is minimized in relation to the intellectual, historical, and cultural aspects conveyed by these mediums, while the aesthetic aspects have been taken over by museums, art centers, and galleries.

For some time now, students who wish to devote themselves to the practice of art no longer become apprentices to a master, inscribed in a chain of direct kinship. As I have already noted, school is far from the only place where transmission occurs. We might even say that art schools are secondary in relation to the system of museums and contemporary art centers, commercial galleries and public and private collectors, reviews and catalogues, and institutions of cultural mediation. We are living in a paradoxical situation, where an increasingly specialized art culture is transmitted by the most general channels and circulates in places where all publics, including the "general public," are blended. It is from within this heterogeneous public that what we call the *artworld* (written as a single word) emerges: an expression that flourished after it served as the title to Arthur Danto's influential article of 1964.¹ And it is at the heart of this milieu, this scene and its institutions, that art schools exist today. The art schools best suited to the current world—and, no doubt, the best schools—are those that deliberately underscore that they consider themselves part of the *artworld* establishment. And so in the late 1970s, there was NSCAD (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) in Halifax; in the 1980s, CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) in Valencia, near Los Angeles, and Goldsmiths College in London; in the 1990s, the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and the Villa ARSON in Nice.

This last example is an excellent indicator of current tendencies. Just like the Städelshule in Frankfurt, which is joined with the Portikus gallery, or the Chelsea College of Art in London, which built a spacious gallery (the Triangle Space) a stone's throw from Tate Britain, Villa Arson brings together an art school and an exhibition center, as well as a program of artist residencies. The Villa Arson is the only school in France that has a real art center, or perhaps I should say that it is the only art center that has a school—and it is this potential inversion that seems to me to be indicative of a tendency that merits analysis.³ The name changes to which the Villa Arson were subjected in the course of its history are already very significant. These are changes not only in terms of the plural and singular of the word *art* but also in terms of the epithets "national" and "international," along with the use of words like *research* and *contemporary*. But there is something still more instructive. In 1994, the idea was raised to cancel the first phase of the Villa's life (the initial three years were to be under the aegis of a municipal school that had yet to be created) and to transform it into a National Institute of Artistic and Pedagogical Research, with a Department of Artistic Productions and Exhibitions (the art center and artist residencies), a Research Department, and a Training Department. It is interesting to note that in this project, which was not carried out, the set of activities designated as "critical discourse, classes, seminars, colloquia, library" (which I would call *instruction*) came under the Research Department and not the Training Department, and the latter dealt only with practical activities (which I would call *apprenticeship*).⁴ It is no less interesting to note that the Training Department was concerned with *dissemination* to a number of potential publics, listed here in order: "artists in residence; researchers; a permanent teaching staff; teachers from other schools (visiting instructors); fourth- and fifth-year students at the Villa Arson; fourth- and fifth-year students from other schools; instructors in continuing education; young artists in advanced graduate programs (grant recipients); cultural decision-makers and elected officials (sensitization to contemporary art)."⁴

Without even wondering if this list established an order of priorities, I must say that in this project, the assimilation of training to *dissemination*; the confusion between users and actors at the Villa; the strange use of the word *public* to speak of teachers, artists, or researchers; the emphasis placed on the plurality of publics; the porousness that places the "public" of students alongside that of cultural decision makers and elected officials—all of this is symptomatic of a tendency that has been accentuated pretty much everywhere since 1994, even though it was not actually put into effect at Villa Arson.

It is not absurd to use the word *public*, indeed *publics* in the plural, to refer to the population at the Villa, since at its heart it is the art center that should be the center of operations. Nevertheless, is it right to put it there? Is it right to drown the specificity of the art school in the din of the art center, putting them on equal footing? I doubt it. It is as if, on the same level but in separate compartments, the permanent teaching staff had to address students; the researchers-theoreticians had to address their potential readers; the curator of an exhibition had to address the contemporary art world; "instructors of instructors" had to address instructors in continuing education; artists-in-residence had to address young artists in graduate programs; and the director of the establishment had to address the cultural decision makers. It is as if, to the plurality of publics, a plurality of addresses had to correspond. This project contained a core of truth that was important to recognize, but it also contained a great risk of resignation before the task that in my view is still a priority for art education—that of the *transmission* of the torch from artist to artist—which is a completely different thing from *dissemination* to various publics.

Long ago, the torch passed from artist to artist by transiting through the "public"—that is the essential truth of this project. I've said it already, and I can't say it enough: At the Salon des Refusés, it was the anonymous crowd that Manet asked to legitimize him, a legitimization that was not accorded without delay by the crowd, but came to him finally by way of the painters who came after him and who showed in their work that *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* had made its case. To cite only one artist: Cézanne, who earned his stripes at the École Gratuite de Dessin in Aix-en-Provence, who twice failed the entrance exam of the École des Beaux-Arts, and who fell back on the Académie Suisse before finally pursuing his métier as an autodidact, copying the masters at the Louvre. In short, these were the painters who attended the "school" of the salon and the museum, spectators among the crowd of spectators. I also can't repeat enough the "message" of which Duchamp was the provocative messenger, which is that from now on the true artist is the one who emerges from the crowd when he receives its blessing "with every delay," not the one who comes out of an *École des Beaux-Arts* equipped with a diploma. Under these conditions, anyone can be an artist and anything can be art, which is not without consequence regarding the knowledge we must have of the *artworld*, in which the best art schools play an explicit part. 1964, the year Danto "invented" the *artworld* after his "revelation" regarding Warhol's *Brillo Box* (so he tells us in book after book), was also the year Arturo Schwartz produced replicas of Duchamp's readymades in the wake of his 1963 retrospective in Pasadena, which would propel dear Marcel to

the rank of artist of the century in record time, more influential than Picasso. This date should make us prick up our ears because it was during this time that the readymade's "message," though "mailed" in 1917 (date of the famous urinal), arrived at its destination. Danto was the first to acknowledge receipt of the message as a philosopher. In the wake of his article, various institutional theories of art saw the light of day (though it should be said in passing that Danto's is not one of them), all supposedly made necessary by extreme cases like Duchamp's readymades or Warhol's Brillo boxes.⁵

An "art world" has always existed, with its own sociology, which Danto's expression *artworld* referred to in the '60s. But it is a much more specific world, a "contemporary art world" that is a very particular segment of the world and the art world, which we are now speaking of. This is an art world often characterized as post-Duchampian because it has taken note of the readymade's "message," but that, to my mind, commits the classic error of interpretation by making the messenger responsible for the (good or bad) news that he is merely delivering. The only art considered authentically contemporary in the eyes of this art world are practices that identify art with art-in-general—a category of art created by Duchamp's readymades that consummated the divorce of art and the traditional artist's *métier*, with its specialized skills and artisan habits (major symptom: the rejection of painting as part of this critique, which sees a paradigm shift in conceptual art). That which is a condition of conceptual practice becomes, by this critique, a normative criterion for art making. The result is that today we hear expressions like "the art scene" and "the contemporary art scene" employed interchangeably, as if the realities that they referred to were congruent and, worse, as if it were taken for granted that the only art that counted was art that interpreted the "message" of the readymade as a radical break, of which Duchamp would be the author.

We no longer believe in these *tabulae rasae* prophesized by the artists of the historical *avant-gardes*, but we still believe firmly in the one *tabula rasa* that claims that the *concept* of art itself changed irretrievably after Duchamp. The entire false debate around the "crisis" in contemporary art, with which we have been beaten about the ears in France for the past fifteen years, comes from this notion. Some, whose tastes are not necessarily reactionary but who refuse to recognize themselves in the conceptual critique supposedly issued by Duchamp, are forced to declare their refusal of contemporary art because the others, who are not necessarily enthusiasts of this purely institutional posterity, identify contemporary art and post-Duchampian art by making the messenger responsible for the news he delivered. And the art schools most aware

of the situation deliberately take their place in this *artworld*, defined as post-Duchampian, which means that they have unconsciously placed themselves in the position of only being able to transmit a tradition that is willingly cut off from everything that preceded Duchamp. Given this, it should not come as a surprise that I have had such a difficult time salvaging the notion of tradition as transmission.

The idea of opening Villa Arson's educational functions to a variety of different publics translates the indeterminacy of the channels of transmission of art since Manet and duly notes it. Yet the omission of the "general public" from the potential publics of the Villa is, in my opinion, an unfortunate and very significant oversight, perhaps this project's most outstanding lapse, because it is the result of a restricted conception of the *artworld*. What is at stake in this oversight is not the sociological definition of the contemporary art public, what is at stake is the ethical dimension of art. When the government invests money of the taxpayer in cultural institutions such as an art center, whether attached to a school or not—even when the polls indicate that these programs interest only a small part of the population—it gives credit to the fact that art rightfully addresses everyone as far as the state is concerned. And that includes the Other with a capital O. This is the fundamental reason for which artists are not simply "art professionals," and we are right to draw a distinction between creators and "creative types." And when the state finances an art school, whether attached to an art center or not, it finances an educational apparatus that must certainly train professionals, but it is also maintaining a means of transmission that must pass this ethical dimension of art from one generation of artists to another.

I have less objection to institutions conceived of as tandem art school/art centers when they take note of the indeterminacy of a situation (1) in which art schools form an integral part of the *artworld*, provided that the *artworld* rightfully extends to everyone and anyone; (2) in which the profession of art is neither protected nor circumscribed to specific technical gestures transmissible solely by the people in the field; and (3) in which the culture that is necessary to acquire the *métier* is difficult to distinguish from the culture that is necessary simply to appreciate contemporary art. Since this is the situation, I can easily imagine that the task of sensitizing elected officials and cultural decision makers to contemporary art would fall to an institution in which artists also happen to be trained; that the instruction practiced there could possibly end up training art critics and curators as well as practitioners; that it is a privileged place where intellectuals, philosophers, and scholars in the social sciences

come to familiarize themselves with the specific problems that contemporary art presents to their disciplines, and where artists in residence work within a community that shares the same passion; and finally, that such a community constitutes the ideal terrain for the blossoming of young talent.

The simplest way to create this terrain would be to say loud and clear that an institution such as this is a school of art. That is to say, it is a school where the goal is to train artists; a school where artistic tradition is transmitted from one generation of artists to another; and not a center for the diffusion of contemporary art that adapts a message that is identical, perhaps, to that of other publics and their various demands. A school such as this is a professional school in a very paradoxical sense, since it specifically addresses the young men and women whose vocation destines them to address everyone. The question of the public, or publics, is in fact a question of address; envisaged sociologically, this is a false problem. (It is this question of address that sometimes makes the cohabitation in art schools of art, communication, and design departments difficult because only the first of these—art—aims for this very specific transfer of universal address.) Addressing the Other is what distinguishes a work of art (especially if it is a readymade) from some unspecified object, from a piece of merchandise (including when it is placed on the market), or from a product whose purpose is some sort of communication (even when it uses technical and aesthetic means borrowed from advertising).

To define the school as an art school is to make the question of address a specific theme, a subject for attention, which does not mean preaching on a daily basis that art should address everyone, but instead—and again this is where we find the paradox of a professional school that does not train professionals—that the entire school is organized in terms of the transmission from artist to artist. Now, as I have emphasized, this transmission is no longer direct. There is no use in regretting it: What is at stake is not a transfer from transmitter to receiver but from addressor to addressee. By transmission from artist to artist, I do not mean a mode of communication but a mode of address. The more we privilege one mode of address, the more it relays and restarts all the others (precisely by virtue of the paradox, specifically directed at young people, that their vocation—I did not say their function—is supposed to address everyone). This mode of address says that the address is the same for everyone and at the same time that it is not in the same place, depending on the “public” to which one belongs. Concretely: the artist puts it on the envelope, in a way; the general public receives it or does not receive it; the artist/professor transfers it to his or her students; the professor of aesthetics talks about it and theorizes

it; the art critic judges it; the art lover feels it was intended for him personally; the cultural decision maker relays it; the budding young artist acknowledges receipt and responds. An art school functions well when everyone is assigned his or her rightful place in relation to the address, provided, of course, that this place is not static. (The sensitized cultural decision maker is also an art lover; the visual artist/professor is an art critic when he critiques his students' work, an artist when he does his own work, and so on.) But if the question of address is not made a theme in the school, everyone is majoring in communication. There are no longer addresses in the plural; publics are targeted; information is disseminated; pedagogy itself becomes a kind of strategy.

Allow me to play devil's advocate for a moment: Let's imagine that art schools are done away with. Their resources are used to gather researchers and artists who have no obligation to transmit what they do (as at Villa Médicis). A center for conferences and colloquia is created; sensitization training for cultural decision makers is organized; a school for curatorial practice, like the Magasin in Grenoble, is built alongside the art center—there are a lot of interesting things that could be done. But then we should not claim to train artists there, lest we create a confusion between art and communication, between the practice of art and the way artistic practice is transferred to mass media. The advantage of the opposite solution is immediately apparent: once the question of address is brought to the fore as a theme, nothing forbids inviting scholars and artists in residence or organizing colloquia and sensitivity workshops; nothing forbids opening these activities to the school's students who are focusing on making art. I have never claimed that this cultural mix was useless in the formation of future artists. Quite the contrary. It is a matter of untangling the confusion I consider dangerous on the level of principles, not on the empirical level. In order to simplify, I will sum things up by saying that the dominant tendency, it seems to me, can be reduced to a slogan: “Everything that is good for the art world is also good for future artists,” which contains a portion of truth and a great risk of ethical resignation. Personally, slogan for slogan, I would be glad to reverse it: “Everything that is good for future artists is also good for the art world.” In this way, we can conceive not of publics in the sociological sense but of the address to publics that arises from the sociological.

Let's finish by going beyond the slogan. Consider this analogy: I remember endless conversations with an art critic friend at the newspaper *Liberation*, who, article after article, tried in a very didactic and intelligent way to explain contemporary art to his public, a public he reasonably judged to be the “general public,” which could not be assumed a priori to have the requisite cultural

expertise. In contrast to his pedagogical approach, I thought of *Libération's* rock music page, deliberately written as if it addressed only rock fans and ignored the rest of the public. And I remarked to my friend that I, who know nothing about rock culture, always read the rock page passionately because by addressing me as if I were an expert, it made me want to become one. The analogy is an analogy in more ways than one. If, in order to sensitize elected officials and cultural decision makers, these people were addressed as if they were already passionate lovers of contemporary art and not children who had to be introduced to it, I am sure a lot of resistance would fall away and we would create allies more easily. If exhibitions were conceived and mounted as if the "general public" expected nothing less, instead of making it feel that no one can enter contemporary art without a password, then the public would more easily get the sense of being part of the "scene." If we speak to an auditorium of cultural mediators as if they invested the same stakes in art as the artists, we would give them the justified sense of being a link in the chain of transmission—a feeling that we nip in the bud when we do the opposite and speak to artists as if they were cultural mediators.

I am not being particularly idealistic in saying this. I practice communication and strategy myself, of course. By addressing everyone as if each person were a lover of art, indeed, an artist, we liberate desire and enthusiasm. If only because a school populated by impassioned people is a more vibrant school, and nothing guarantees the maintenance of passion more than the annual arrival of young men and women consumed by the passion to make art. I want to plead here for the maintenance of art schools conceived as crucibles in which technical *apprenticeship*, theoretical *instruction*, and the *formation* of judgment are brought together to create a unique question of address. But I have not forgotten that art schools have not always existed, that they are fragile at the moment, and that there is no reason to think that they will always exist. We should ask ourselves why Beuys had up to six hundred students lapping up his words at the Düsseldorf Academy. He spoke to them only when he held public discussions at documenta. Perhaps the art school of the future will not necessarily be an institution made of bricks and run by an appointed team of professionals, but nothing more or less than a mode of transmission of art addressed to everyone as if they were all artists. The day this school that is no longer one comes into existence, I will personally feel no nostalgia for CalArts, Goldsmiths, or Villa Arson any more than I feel nostalgia for the Bauhaus or the old École des Beaux-Arts.