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NICHOLAS GREEN'S CULTURAL RE-EDUCATION  
FOR THE NINETEEN-NINTIES

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For more than a century we, in the Western Tradition, have viewed the works of a handful of artists, the Impressionists and Post Impressionists from a rather romanticized perspective. We see individuals who produced these works as artistic geniuses who broke with tradition and set the terms for what we have come to understand as the Modernist paradigm, but Nicholas Green offers us new insights to this fertile moment in art history. In each of three articles he takes a revisionist approach to analyzing the relationship between the so-called avant-garde artistic achievements and the emerging economic practice of dealers and collectors of modern art between 1850 and 1880. He uses a similar format in each article to present his concerns: he begins with a fact-based scenario, which epitomizes the issues in question, and then proceeds to bring additional information to bear upon the situation, making new interpretations possible.

In “Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformations of the Artistic Field in France During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,”<sup>1</sup> he gives us a glimpse of the art auctions at the Hotel Drouot, as well as the various channels for publicizing such events. In “‘All the Flowers of the Field’: The State, Liberalism and Art in France under the Early Third Republic,”<sup>2</sup> he evokes the emergence of the avant-garde by juxtaposing the Salon des Refuses in 1863 and the 1880 Salon in which all organizational decisions were handed over to the artists themselves. Finally, in “Circuits of Production, Circuits of Consumption: The Case of Mid-Nineteenth Century Art Dealing”<sup>3</sup> he describes a Parisian street scene in 1858 with carefully arranged window exhibitions of paintings, a moment in history just before the dealers of Impressionist paintings were to take their positions in the unfolding of the story of modern art. In each article he then elaborates on the traditional art historical meanings signified by these events, followed by facts which undermine the romanticized version of the story. In so doing, he sets the stage for his deconstruction of what may be called a *modernist myth*.

Green intends to reframe our view of art’s position within the cultural and socio-economic situation of late nineteenth century France. He sites several authors who have also addressed these issues, including financial circumstances of individual artists, the emergence of dealers and collectors of contemporary art, exhibition practices, the artistic and political impact of state policies, the evolution of the Salon, and sales prices commanded for works of contemporary artists.<sup>4</sup> Green astutely distinguishes among the

various approaches taken by the other writers, but, as far as he is concerned, they all have in common one shortcoming: the fact that they utilize an *a priori specialness of art* as the underpinning of their arguments.

In “Flowers” he devotes a section to “Methodological Approaches” in which he demonstrates how Marie-Claude Genet-Delacroix and Miriam Levin, while “substantially contributing to more adequate re-interpretations of this area,” still hold to a “commonsense artistic agenda that determines the terms of the debate.” In clarifying the problems he has with this stance he says:

Implicit in both texts are assumptions that it is the importance or unimportance of *art* as culture that matters, and that, of course, we know *what art is!*... what goes unchallenged is the naturalness of art as the epistemological given.<sup>5</sup>

In “Temperaments” Green devotes less space to explain his objection to this traditional privileging of art but does it all the same. Here he succinctly clarifies his agenda with a simple model of economic theory:

In Britain...much economic theory...has tended to conceptualize the productive process as a *unidirectional* cycle, privileging the moment of production over the secondary and subordinate moments of distribution and consumption.<sup>6</sup>

Green then suggests that when we apply this model to the cultural domain, “the effect is to reinforce the status and specificity of art as the object of focus, correlating the production of meaning with the moment of production.”<sup>7</sup> Thus if the “meaning” of art is bestowed at the “moment of production” then, naturally, the other phases of the cycle, distribution and consumption, are relatively incidental. This is essentially how art has been regarded in the Western tradition.

With his revisionism, Green wants to do more than retell the same story; he wants to “change the terms of the debate.” He says that we can’t make an analysis of how socio-economic conditions impact on culture, or vice-versa, until we remove the privileged status of art from our paradigm. In order to accomplish this, Green makes two suggestions:

First, that we break open the way we think about art objects and structures, engaging as much with those other *nonartistic* cycles that art

simultaneously inhabits—leisure, education, décor. Second, that circuits of production and consumption are conceived as *multidirectional* with the recognition that points of distribution and consumption may be equally important as the moment of production in the projection of cultural meanings.<sup>8</sup>

With this forthright statement in hand, Green's agenda becomes clear. He wants to reposition art within society in order for us to recognize that what we have traditionally viewed as the formal evolution of art, leading up to the avant-garde breakthroughs of the late nineteenth century, and the rarified status afforded to art owe their occurrence, not to the intense drive of a few talented artists, but to the influence of socio-economic conditions that have typically not been associated with artistic production. Through his examples, Green demonstrates that traditional perceptions of the situation are distortions of fact, that they are, in essence, part of the modernist myth that surrounds this body of work.

Green goes on to discuss the issue of state policies in relation to the arts. The mythic view of this period is one which suggests that art itself became a great liberating voice within society, and that the perpetrators of this art were themselves rugged individuals, maverick spirits, artistic geniuses, who necessarily located themselves outside of the artistic mainstream. Green undermines this view by mapping out a rather complex structure of causes and effects in state policies, which he believes all contribute to the growing importance of individualism and the importance of art to nationalistic concerns.

As one example, Green points to the year 1863, and describes it as a turning point not because of the Salon des Refuses, but because in that year the Academie des beaux-arts was stripped of control of the school, and the curriculum was reorganized to include science and art history. Green interprets these changes, which unified the visual arts under one "administrative rubric," as part of a general push under the Second Empire toward modernization and progress. Especially significant for Green is the greater importance given to education and training, which were intended to facilitate progress. He notes that by 1870, with the fall of Napoleon III, the administration of arts services fell into the Ministry for Public Instruction. He explains the rationale for this change:

Education was, it argued, the legitimate home for art because, as against the traditional exclusivity of cultivated elites, art policy was to promote participation by all citizens in the universal love of beauty with its moralizing and civilizing attributes.<sup>9</sup>

Here we can begin to see the implications for an emphasis on individuality, as a national resource, to be fostered and cultivated for the glory of France. Green states that “what occurred in 1870 was a shift central to the argument about the reworking of art; a shift towards a preoccupation with *plurality* of artistic talent.”<sup>10</sup> Building on this argument, Green suggests that “the watchword was cultural diversity,” and quotes Gustave Larroumet who, in 1888, addressing the matter of distributing prizes to Ecole des Beaux-arts students, insists that disputes between differing schools be overlooked and that “talent alone... wherever it is to be found” must be cultivated. Furthermore, Larroumet says that “it is the right, the duty of the artist to be exclusive, to realize his own conception of nature and life.”<sup>11</sup> But Green asserts that it was not merely the cultivation of talent that was at stake, or an appreciation of diversity. Green quotes Larroumet once more, to emphasize this point:

If each and every school, hostile to the others, only thinks of itself, nonetheless the result of all this egotistical activity is to contribute to the shared honour of French art. From these concrete phenomena derives something abstract, of greater interest than all the particular groups... It is this abstract quality which is French art.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Green weaves together a dense maze of information which he uses to make a few critical points. First, he seeks to demonstrate that the individualism, the uniqueness of vision which we so highly prize in the legacy of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters is not the symptom of a self-willed and deliberate going against the tide of the mainstream. On the contrary, such individualism was the norm; it was nurtured, fostered, and wholeheartedly sanctioned by state policies. Second, Green sees the change in official policy toward art as a shift from viewing it as an aesthetic entity to considering it as an educational tool, which, in turn, he relates to the cultivation and enrichment of the individual.

In furthering the themes of individualism, Green focuses his attention on another aspect of the system, specifically, the distribution and consumption systems—dealing in contemporary art as an entrepreneurial enterprise in a booming capitalistic economy.

Here, again, Green sets out to deconstruct myths, one of which, in this case, usually interprets the economic climate as a set of “conditions for or barriers to art’s development.” Viewed traditionally, such conditions, he says, “are not seen as the springboard for opening up wider historical and theoretical issues.”<sup>13</sup> By contrast, he prefers to examine modern art dealing as a “particular sub-domain of capitalism,” and as such he demonstrates ways in which the dealers cultivated the market for contemporary works of art, especially certain kinds of work.

For example, dealers such as Durand-Ruel would buy up everything from an artist’s studio, and then proceed to sell it off, including rough sketches, memory notes, and unfinished works, promoting them as “first thoughts” and “truly personal expressions.” Green makes a point of informing us that in the past works such as these might have been given or sold to only an intimate circle close to the artist, and that prices for them would have remained fixed at a low rate. However, by this time, dealers took great care to crop the works to suitable proportions, mount and frame them in the customary gilt frames. In effect, Green is describing the marketing and packaging strategies of the late nineteenth century art dealers.

Similarly, Green mentions the production and sales of exhibition catalogues which increasingly utilized biographical information and intimate glimpses into the personal lives of the artists. This fed the interest in the creative personality of the artist, and, in a way, established the precedents for the publishing of biographies of artists’ lives, which begin to flourish at this time. Green discusses the biographies at some length, citing the trend toward progress in education, the primacy given to a scientific approach, and an emerging emphasis on art history as contributing factors to the forms the biographies took. These served only to reinforce the stereotypical notions of the artistic personality.

In the promoting and selling of works of art, Green suggests that a shift had taken place which moved the primary values in art from the single painting to the single artist, whose body of work was seen as the product of his *individuality*, his unique temperament. Green puts it this way:

.... the articulation of the creative personality within art discourse was the result of a historically specific shift in the organization of knowledge, sustained on the one hand by internal conditions.... and on the other by the dominant ideological forces molding republican citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

With his reference here to “dominant ideological forces,” Green is alluding to the issue of individualism as the natural resource of the French Republic alluded to earlier.

Thus, for marketing purposes, the dealers put the focus on the creative personality of the artist and presented his work as the embodiment of that individuality. Whereas previously there had been little or no market for sketches, at this point such items were seen within this new context, and they were in demand. The implications for the ways in which an artist might modify his work, under these circumstances, are tremendous.

Finally, in all three articles Green attempts to justify his revisionist approach by suggesting its value to contemporary cultural studies. He sees a certain naiveté (a remnant of modernist thinking?) in “professionals—from artists and administrators to academics like art historians—who remain largely wedded to the broken dream of social democracy.”<sup>15</sup> He suggests that now, more than ever, when public policy can and does have such impact on culture, there is a need for interdisciplinary scholarship. Green clarifies as follows:

.... There is a very clear cut politics at stake—a politics that holds to the decentering of art as a seminal device in transgressing and transforming cultural categories and hierarchies. A politics that argues for multiple and fluid meanings as against the fixed text insofar as the former admits of a multiple of points of (potential) struggle over meaning. A politics, finally, that sees genuine interdisciplinary work—cultural analysis of the economic *at the same moment* as economic analysis of the cultural—as the only viable way forward for humanities education relevant to the 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

Green’s paradigm requires that we abandon the long-enshrined status of art as the highest form of cultural expression. This point seems to be the most significant and radical aspect to his approach. For some who still find “the meaning bestowed at the moment of production” to be a matter of interest and relevance, Green’s model may be a little disorienting, if not even distressing. Yet, in considering this approach, we need to ask if it yields insights that are valid and pertinent to our present day concerns, and there is no question that it does. Green’s model, which could be applied to any culture, from any time (though its most fruitful application would be to the twentieth century, because

we have become a mass consumption society), is legitimate. In fact, the issues he raises point to several avenues of research, not the least of which might be to clarify—since, in Green’s model, art’s status has drastically deflated to that of other consumer goods, to be marketed for economic gain—what art’s relationship, purpose, or benefit to culture might be.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Nicholas. “Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformation of the Artistic Field in France During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century.” *Art History* 10 (March 1987): pp. 57-76.

<sup>2</sup> ----- “‘All the Flowers of the Field’: The State Liberalism and Art under the Early Third Republic.” *Oxford Art Journal* 10 (1987): pp. 70-84.

<sup>3</sup> ----- “Circuits of Production, Circuits of Consumption: The Case of Mid-Nineteenth Century French Art Dealing.” *Art Journal* (Spring, 1989): pp.29-34.

<sup>4</sup> Green makes note of the following writers, commenting on some of them in his footnotes: John Rewald, Albert Boime, White and White, T. J. Clark, and Francis Haskell.

<sup>5</sup> “Temperaments.”

<sup>6</sup> “Circuits.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Flowers.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gustave Larroumet, *Discours prononce a la distribution des recompenses 25 Novembre 1888*, 1888, p. 16. Quoted in “Flowers.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> “Temperaments.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Flowers.”

<sup>16</sup> “Circuits.”