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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Arrested Moments

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Matthew Taylor Williams

Committee in charge:

Professor Monique Van Genderen, Chair  
Professor Harvey Goldman  
Professor Kyong Park  
Professor Jordan Rose

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to all who have helped me along the way. My deepest gratitude and appreciation goes out to all of you.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Arrested Moments

by

Matthew Taylor Williams

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Monique Van Genderen, Chair

This project seeks to add to the conversation regarding aesthetic disciplines, in particular art, and how they shape and inform social relations. Drawing from historical precedents and formal metaphors, I seek to illuminate how art is used to make the societies that accommodate them appear more creative and free. As an artist, I am primarily concerned with how my work engages with these concepts.



## ARTIST STATEMENT

My practice is primarily concerned with how works of art make society appear to be more creative and free than it actually is. As an artist, I am interested in how art has been instrumental in making the prevailing mode of production, consumption, communication, and administration more palatable. To me, artistic forms have become decor not just in an architectural sense, but in an ideological one as well. In the same way that art can make a barren space appear more attractive, it can also make a monotonous society look more intriguing. Drawing from formal metaphors and historical precedents, I attempt to point out how art serves the dominant order of things by championing the sentiments many yearn for in the context of daily life. In making art, I seek to illuminate its ability to make certain thoughts visible and permissible. However, this permissibility may only be because these thoughts and sentiments are presenting themselves as art. As an artist, it is important to me that there is a degree of transparency regarding how visual art operates. It is for this reason that much of my work deals with the process of production and how a healthy balance between clarity and obscurity can be maintained. Works of art open themselves up to art criticism, and this allotted fissure in the social fabric can lead to new questions regarding the nature of things. It is for this reason that I believe criticism to be the hallmark sentiment of our time. In the arts, this sentiment seems to have supplanted that of free expression. However, much of the critical sentiments and statements are derived from a lack of free expression outside the pretense of art. My particular interest in art is how it represents the society that accommodates it, and how both art and society are amenable to change.

Oftentimes, my work is abstract. For me, this is not an initial compulsion, but a relic of a process. I am particularly interested in how information becomes abstracted through various processes. It is for this reason that I often deploy the formal metaphor of finding existing structures and altering them to the point of abstraction. However, I would not call my work entirely abstract. I make works that end up being abstract, and there are specific processes that make it so. Examples of this can be seen in the splitting and cleaving of concrete blocks to create new forms and the cutting and splicing of aluminum foil rolls to create different shapes.

Drawing from metaphorical and historical precedents, I seek out how works of art relate to the making of social relations and institutions. Examples of this include how shifts in the principles of building relate to the social order, or how think tanks like the Congress for Cultural Freedom shape artistic discourse. My particular interest as an artist is not in creating the world as I would like it to be. I am much more interested in the world as it exists and how existing structures are susceptible to transformation.

## THE CONGRESS FOR CULTURAL FREEDOM

My own personal interest in how abstraction has been deployed to make cultural and social changes preceded my knowledge of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The Congress for Cultural Freedom was a CIA-funded think tank dedicated to the promotion of abstract American art as a form of Western cultural diplomacy. The historical precedence of a think tank dedicated to the promotion of abstract art seemed to solidify my thinking about the tripartite connection between the cultural, the social, and the abstract. In addition to this, the CCF solidified my thinking about the impact culture has on society. I saw this as an amazing opportunity to look at the history of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and how this has impacted the discourse surrounding modern and contemporary art.

The Congress for Cultural Freedom was created on June 29th, 1950 in West Berlin. Headed by Michael Josselson and Tom Braden, this program received direct funding from the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States to counter the view that liberal democracy was less compatible with culture than communism. The CCF not only organized meetings but funded shows they felt would prove Western art represented creative and intellectual freedom. This was a myth, as creative and intellectual freedom was largely inaccessible to much of the population in the United States and abroad. However, it was the Congress's mission to make this myth known. They did so by valorizing the work of specific individuals as evidence that the societal conditions in the United States were not only conducive to but responsible for, the great cultural achievements that occurred on American soil. Inevitably, Western European writers and artists

were championed as well, but the Congress itself seemed to favor abstract works from artists in the United States. They seemed to be particularly interested in those from New York.

Upon his return to America after fighting in the Second World War, Tom Braden began to see the Western Allies' Establishment as rigidly conservative and nationalistic. He felt that if the United States wanted to maintain its supremacy, it would have to support the democratic left (Saunders, 1999). Knowing that he was supporting an increasingly unpopular position, Braden sought to change the public image of the West in order to win the hearts and minds of the public. He and the Congress sought to create more moderate, Anti-Soviet leftists through the use of propaganda. Ironically, much of the visual propaganda was formally abstract. The fact that the work had no overt informative message made it a prime candidate for its use in the CCF's program. It fed the idea that the US and the West were open societies, where individuals were allowed to think for themselves. The work also appeared to be a relic of a society that was more culturally liberal than the Soviet Union. This may or may not have been the case, but the Congress for Cultural Freedom saw these abstract works of art as an excellent means to a simplistic end: making the Soviet Union look like the conservative and nationalistic America Tom Braden returned to after the Second World War. Abstract art became a visual relic of a society that was far more controlled than the art it produced.

What abstract art truly signified was a society segregated by disciplines. The abstract art of the '50s and '60s sought to explore the inherent properties of art through flatness, depth, form, and color. Art's formal properties were often debased to the aforementioned values, and the history and context of this art were rarely called into question. What occurred in the work was directly in front of the viewer and he or she needed to look no further than what was represented.

To the CCF, art was a means for individuals to express creative freedom, and for them, this was to be the metric by which the historical contribution of any society should be measured. They saw art that sought to reach the limits of its own discipline as being not just about formal innovation, but about freedom.

Freedom has occupied a central role in the dialogue surrounding aesthetics for over two centuries now. In Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, freedom is loosely defined as the ability to legislate and govern oneself. It is closely aligned with reason and distinct from nature (Kant, 1987). Four years after the publishing of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* a playwright, poet, and writer by the name of Friedrich Schiller wrote a book titled, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller sought to reconcile the stark divide between nature and reason, but he could only find one way. He felt that nature was more in line with the concepts of sense, and that reason was more in line with the concepts of freedom. Schiller felt that all these terms coalesced around the work of art. It was the work of art that could lend sense to reason and nature to freedom. Schiller detracted from Kant in that his definition of nature was primarily concerned with the natural impulses of man. He saw this as a keen threat to the dominant order and felt it was in direct tension with freedom (Schiller, 1954). It is worth noting that much of Schiller's writing was in response to the French Revolution which was happening just across the border of his native Württemberg. The violence of the revolution repelled Schiller and was indicative of a society driven by sense and nature. Schiller felt that an ideal society would maintain a healthy balance between sense, nature, freedom, and reason. Art was a place where this balance of the aforementioned faculties could be demonstrated. Thus, freedom became the logical endgame for any work of art, because it led to a society in which every individual could legislate and govern

for themselves. Aesthetic revolutions came to supplant political ones because it was the aesthetic sensibility that would truly liberate political subjects and set them free.

“I hope to convince you that this subject is far less alien to the need of the age than to its taste, that we must indeed, if we are to solve that political problem in practice, follow the path of aesthetics since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom.” (Schiller, 1954 p.27)

For Freidrich Schiller, works of art were to deal in semblance or representation, and they were to represent the ideal. What members of the Congress for Cultural Freedom managed to do was instrumentalize abstract works of art as representations of the ideal. This closely follows Hegel’s *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, wherein he claims that the work of art is superior to the products of nature because the work of art makes its journey through the spirit (Hegel, 1998). Therefore, art was not only a representation of the ideal but a relic of one’s ability to transcend nature. These two components were key in the works of art championed by the Congress. Works of art came to signify not just the ideal conditions of Western democracy, but the ideal subjects the conditions produced.

Although they were seemingly insignificant in a history of art that was notable in its own right, the Congress for Cultural Freedom set an important precedent. They saw art as means to quantify and showcase the freedom that a given society had. This sentiment seems to persist today. To a degree, visual art operates as a symbolic representation of creative freedom. Works of art have been instrumentalized as a means to make the freedoms a society grants its citizens self-evident. It is not the content of art that does this, but its context. It shows that there will always be a place where creativity, freedom, expression, and critical reasoning can all coexist and thrive

and that this context will be anything done under the pretense of art. It seems innocuous, but what it probes at is a lack of freedom and creativity in the rest of one's waking life.

It's fascinating to me that the Congress for Cultural Freedom was able to use abstract art so successfully as a form of political propaganda. Arguably, this says just as much about the art and artists selected by the Congress as it does about the Congress itself. Initially, these works were sought out because of their cultural impact. However, the push these artists received from the Congress could do nothing but help their success. I, like many others, lament the fact that such great art fulfilled an ancillary role in a deeply politicized campaign. What I am interested in is how and why these individuals chose the art they did. What the Congress for Cultural Freedom saw in this group of artists were individuals who had somehow made something that alleviated the alienating forces of daily life. People were looking in this direction for obvious reasons, and the CCF sought to use this as a means to its own end. It is clear to me that the Congress for Cultural Freedom needed art more than art needed the Congress for Cultural Freedom. The relationship between the CCF and art in the 1950s and 60s is a beautiful model system for how art relates to the dominant order today. The two seem to collaborate with one another to perpetuate societal developments, and it is this entanglement that can often make it difficult to determine where the locus of power is. At best, both keep each other in check, and at worst, both are ways of maintaining the status quo. Regardless of this, it does seem that the success of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was largely attributed to the work they selected.

The congress itself disbanded in the 1960s, but it left a lasting impact on the trajectory of modern art in the West. The congress saw art as a sanctified space for a group of aristocrats to exchange ideas in regards to how individuals should be governed. This happens by way of the

formal methodologies within one's discipline, and in the case of Western art, it was done by actively challenging those formal methodologies. This is something Joseph Leo Koerner and Lisbet Rausing call "free critique," and it is something they believe art and art criticism bequeathed to philosophy. In the West, it seems that any criticism is welcome within the confines of a formal discipline. The irony is that this criticism has shifted American values and has made significant social changes domestically. Art today seems to get much of its value not from free expression, but from free critique. Koerner and Rausing feel this defines cultural values by opening other disciplines outside of art to formal criticism (Nelson et al., 2011). The need to promote ideals like creative expression and free-thinking is no longer a primary concern of the United States government, and a new form of critical self-reflexivity seems to be the hallmark ideal of liberal Western democracies. Possessing the freedom and liberty to express one's internal discourse would eventually lead to freedom to critique and criticize. However, it seems as if art has become almost entirely concerned with the latter and has almost entirely disregarded the former. The Congress for Cultural Freedom laid the cultural foundation of the West upon the sentiments of free expression. It was this foundation upon which the edifice of free critique would be scaffolded.

After congressional backlash to take the "Advancing American Art" exhibition on a global tour in the year 1946, the state department decided to turn to the CIA for assistance in the presentation of this new current in American art. If state funds could not be approved publicly for the support of this work, then it would have to be done privately. Although the mechanisms that funded this work were incredibly opaque, much of the funding came from the public sector. Fake foundations were set up by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and then funded by the CIA.



These fake foundations then made sizable donations back to the CCF. The foundations only existed on paper and were simple ways to dilute funding from the CIA. Former CIA agent Tom Braden openly stated in a 1999 interview that the fabrication of these foundations helped encourage new donors to take the CCF seriously as an organization and that it persuaded wealthy individuals to donate to the cause.

Although Nelson Rockefeller was never an active member of the CCF, he was one of the key protagonists in the story of abstract art in America. He had an extensive collection of modern art and access to one of the most influential platforms in the Western hemisphere. Founded by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in 1929, the Museum of Modern art was the premiere venue for abstract American art. Abby's son, Nelson, often referred to the institution as 'mommy's museum.' He also liked to refer to Abstract Expressionism as 'free enterprise painting.' This public institution received most of its funding from private donors, many of whom were personal friends of the Rockefellers. This incredibly powerful institution ratified the existence of modern art as a historical fact. Much of this was done at the behest of those who collected it, and the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art acted to fortify the cultural value of the works they exhibited. The Congress was instrumental in this as many of its members were also on the board of trustees at MoMA (Saunders, 1999 p. 260-9).

In his 1939 essay entitled "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg claimed that support for innovations in art and culture was historically given by "an elite among the ruling classes, to which the avant-garde assumed to be cut off, but to which it had always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold." He claimed that in the United States the same mechanism must prevail (Greenberg, 1939, p.8). It most certainly did, and nothing greater

exemplified the confluence of financial patronage, political influence, and creative expression than the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Another organization the Rockefellers played a central role in during the rise of the American avant-garde was the Council on Foreign Relations. Some records show that between the years 1940-1945 the Rockefeller Foundation donated \$300,000 (almost \$6 million in today's dollars when adjusted for inflation) to the Council's War and Peace Studies project (Sklar, 1980, p.136-7). The head of the Security and Armaments section of this project was none other than Allen Dulles, who only a few years later would become director of the CIA (Perloff, 1988 p.104). Dulles would go on to appoint agents Tom Braden and Michael Joselsson as integral actors in the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

With quite a bit of help from the CCF, MoMA became the official mouthpiece of abstract art in America. This is arguably still true to this day. The only exception is that the CCF is no longer in existence. Although abstract expressionism lost most of its wind around the same time the CCF dissolved, MoMA has maintained its influence over the discourse surrounding modern and contemporary art. In the year 1967, the Congress for Cultural Freedom disbanded and renamed itself in the wake of several revelations that they were receiving direct funding from the CIA. The last vestige of the Congress, the European Intellectual Mutual Aid Fund, was put to rest when it was consumed by the Open Society in 1991.

Not long after the CCF disbanded in 1967, there were global uprisings that sought to challenge the dominant order of things. Many individuals, in particular students, were disheartened by the ability of Western democracies to instrumentalize nearly all disciplines and to use them as a means to their own ends. Art was no different, and the images of a free society

that the Congress for Cultural Freedom sought to create were no match for the public broadcasting much of these protests received. People were alienated, and a simple image of the freedom and autonomy they yearned for would not suffice.

However, what would supplant forms of free expression would now be forms of free critique. Many of the works gaining institutional support after 1968 were ironically those that critiqued them. Works of art no longer sought to create meaning and value through the methodologies of production but through the methodologies of the exhibition. In an essay entitled, "Presenting the Unpresentable: the Sublime," Jean-Francois Lyotard claimed that reflections on art should no longer bear essentially on the sender, but on the addressee or instance (Lyotard, 1982, p.62-9). Two years earlier in a television series entitled, "Shock of the New," a rather conservative art critic by the name of Robert Hughes declared the avant-garde dead. He claimed that individuals no longer look towards works of art for civic instruction (Hughes, 15:00-16:45). This may or may not be true, but regardless of whether or not it was the case, both proclamations had tremendous ramifications for the underpinnings of art.

In her book entitled *Trilateralisms*, Holly Sklar wrote of the crisis of liberal democracy as being one that has debased freedom of speech to freedom to blow off steam (Sklar, 1980 p.46). She sees think tanks like the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations as key proponents of this sentiment. They not only sought to appease the status quo through the management of contradictions, but they also sought to create images of the West that made it appear more open and free than it actually was.

There's nothing wrong with the freedom to criticize. The only issue is that free critique often fails to produce the same freedoms when it comes time to act. This new trend in American

art seems to have its roots in not just the museums that show art, but the individuals that control them. A list of current officers and trustees at MoMA consists of roughly 60 individuals. 19 out of these 60 some-odd individuals are listed members of the Council on Foreign Relations(<https://www.moma.org/about/trustees>). It seems as if Sklar's claims about the Council on Foreign Relations' management of free speech and the ability to blow off steam has made a healthy home for itself under the pretense of contemporary art.

Today, a tremendous amount of art clings to criticality as a perfunctory method of engaging with the world. It seems as if the civic duty of self-reflexivity has eclipsed that of self-expression. It also seems that an overwhelming willingness to showcase the work of hyper-critical artists within bluechip museums and galleries has become a form of public atonement for the sins of the dominant order. It has become a way for artists to 'blow off steam.' Not unlike the Council on Foreign Relations' self-published periodical *Foreign Affairs*, the art championed by directors of galleries and museums has become an instrumental component of the manufacturing of positive press.

I'm interested in the history of the Congress for Cultural Freedom because it tells a legitimate story of art's service to the aristocracy. The CCF capitalized on the idea that art and artists create images of society that make it appear to be freer than it actually is. These images were then used as collective signifiers for Western cultural values. They seemed to realize that art was a paradoxical object. However, this rift between the artists' intention and their instrumentalization by the government they were subject to might say more about the state of affairs in the West than any other object could. In turn, what the Congress for Cultural Freedom

did so eloquently was to create a use for what was a paradoxical and puzzling product of the society they sought to depict.

## FROM BELL TO BECK AND BACK AGAIN

A book authored by Daniel Bell in the year 1973 entitled, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, characterizes new shifts in the role of science and technology in relation to culture and society. Bell was a Technocrat and known member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In his concluding chapter of the book, Bell produces a vision of the future that is informed by current shifts in the structuring of society. One particularly interesting section profiles the impact modernist principles have had on the shaping of social structures. He claims that over the past century Western societies have suffered from a widening division between culture and social structure. Bell sees culture as rooted in the antinomian justification of the enhancement of the self. He blames this paradox on the nature of capitalism itself. Bell seems to lament the fact that capitalism in the mid-twentieth century started to promote itself according to hedonistic pleasure-seeking and the accumulation of material possessions. In turn, moral codes were not only relaxed and interrogated but largely lost to the dialectic between social structure and culture. A self-interested way of life came to define individual freedoms (Bell, 1973 p. 475-80).

For Bell, modernism created a fissure in the social fabric through the interrogation of its boundaries. He claims that the artistic imagination was constrained by the shaping discipline of art, but art today has broken down all genres and claims there is no distinction between art and life. He claims that modernism breaks up the rational cosmology that has historically organized experience, and that this has had lasting implications for liberal culture. Bell claims this because modernism seeks to take the doctrine of personal freedom to places where liberalism refuses to

go. In turn, liberal culture has a difficult time explaining its reticence. This leaves the moral order in the same state of confusion and disarray that the discipline of art finds itself in. For Bell, changes in consciousness and cultural style lead to shifts in the organization of social arrangements and institutions. Bell sees Western democracies in a moralistic state of crisis, and he seems to attribute this to developments in modern art. For Bell, challenges to the status quo regarding artistic principles had been refashioned as challenges to the status quo regarding social principles. In the same way that Joseph Leo Koener and Lisbet Rausing felt art bequeathed forms of criticism to philosophy, Daniel Bell believed that shifts in art and cultural style inevitably led to shifts in social relations and institutions.

This passage from Daniel Bell could almost pass as a form of penance for the sins he committed at the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Bell seems to lament the fact that modern art has promoted the false rationalization of individual freedoms according to hedonistic pleasure-seeking promoted by Western capitalism. Bell's proximity to the Congress for Cultural Freedom gave him a keen insight into the role modern art played in the battle between social structures and cultural impulses. It seems as if the lasting consequences of the promotion of modernist principles and their imbrication into liberal society were largely unforeseen by the CCF. What Daniel Bell saw as hedonistic pleasure-seeking has become more of a civic duty than a cultural style. It's easy to observe and speak about these issues as past events. However, these past events have had lasting effects on the discourse surrounding contemporary art.

In a transcribed lecture given in 1980 entitled, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," Jurgen Habermas claims that neoconservatives like Daniel Bell have attributed the shortcomings of modern society to modern culture (Foster et. all, 1983, p. 8). He not only feels that this is a

mischaracterization of modernity, but that many neoconservatives have hastily precipitated the amalgamation of the boundary between art and life. In fact, it has already happened according to their worldview. Habermas claims that many like Bell welcome the process of societal modernization whilst bemoaning the process of cultural modernization. Habermas makes the argument that while the cultural does interact with the societal, it does so in an indirect and mediated fashion.

Habermas makes this claim because art has become its own autonomous sphere in the process of modernization. By doing so, art has created a class of experts on the subject. What results from this is a widening gap between the culture of experts and the culture of the general public. Habermas claims that the original goals of the Enlightenment, which sought to utilize the developments of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, have largely fallen short of their desires. He goes further in stating that many of the modernist attempts to level art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality to one plane, have not only failed to materialize but have made the structures of art that they were meant to dissolve glaringly obvious. Habermas argues that nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form and that an emancipatory effect does not follow. He claims that the destruction of an autonomously developed container does little more than disperse its contents.

In short, Habermas seems to refute the claims of Bell because art and life are beyond reconciliation. When Bell attributes hedonistic impulses in modern society to liberatory gestures in modern culture, he fails to see that the latter has little effect on the former. If the claims of Bell sound familiar to the conservative aphorism that “politics is downstream from culture,” it is for



good reason. Bell seems to have laid the foundation for such a proclamation. However, if we are to take the reflections of Habermas at face value, there's very little truth to this.

In the book *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse writes of a world that has been flattened out beyond two dimensions. He claims that technological rationality has become the status quo and that within this status quo, there is little room for resistance. In the third chapter of the book, titled, "The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation," Marcuse discusses how the oppositional and transcendent nature of high culture has been destroyed by technological rationality. He claims that high culture has been destroyed not by the denial and rejection of its cultural values, but by the wholesale incorporation of these values into the established order of things. High culture is destroyed by its reproduction and display on a massive scale. He later defines desublimation as the opposite of artistic alienation, or what he terms sublimation. For Marcuse, desublimation is the incorporation of artistic alienation into the kitchen, office, or shop. It not only replaces mediated gratification with instant gratification but also illustrates how the dominant order is able to make use of all forms of cultural production (Marcuse, 1964, p. 56-83). The absence of the sphere of high culture makes critical distance less attainable. The incorporation of cultural values into daily life has made many of the formal differences and distinctions art has historically made invalid. This is because the fundamental nature of the status quo is its reproducibility. Therefore, when works of art become reproducible, they are part of the status quo and lose much of their critical distance.

Marcuse seems to acknowledge that alienation can lead to great works of art, but what happens when great works of art are turned into infinitely reproducible products? It seems as if forms of mass reproduction have a tendency to de-fang art. Once great works of art can now be

disregarded the same as any other mass-produced object. This is because desublimation not only makes artistic alienation back into the very thing it sought to disengage from, but it also removes these works from the spaces that co-authored their meaning. It would obviously follow that I lament the fact that art has largely fallen victim to desublimation. However, this seems like a necessary evil. I say this because desublimation is a cheap and affordable way to disperse great works of art, and these great works of art have historically provided a temporal break from the dominant order of things. Desublimation has now turned these great works into cheap content that is readily available and able to appease the masses. Whereas works of art in their intended environments can produce more dynamic forms of engagement, mass-produced works of art are often flat and debased to simple yes or no questions. The question becomes whether or not you like or enjoy the work and not how it creates meaning and what its function is.

In an essay entitled, “Freedom’s Just Another Word,” Terri Weissman compares the work of Allan Sekula to the political organizing of Glenn Beck. Weissman claims that while Sekula’s work entitled, *Waiting for Tear Gas*, produces an intellectual and civic space of delayed meaning, Beck’s “Restoring Honor,” rally produces an audience that is not a political public, but a spectacle of consumers. Weissman claims that textual literalism has perverted democratic politics and has led to fundamentalist movements that embrace democracy’s form while rejecting its content (Dumbadze and Hudson et. al, 2013 p. 311-21). While I agree with Weissman that the form and content of democracy must be integrally linked for it to function, I lament the fact that she does little to engage with the fundamental position of Beck and his audience. It seems as if the rejection of textual literalism has been supplanted by the reversion to expert opinion. I say this because in the dialectics of a democracy textual literalism would be no less legitimate than

literary analysis. Weissman even claims that democracy requires open dialogue and that the best argument should prevail. In a disturbing turn of events, Weissman takes recourse to the very rhetoric she opposes in the piece. She invalidates the claims of Beck and his audience due to their inability to understand what they are seeking to restore. Weissman feels as if they are using the language of dissensus in service of consensus. There is an undeniable truth to this, as many involved in the right-wing fundamentalist movement in America reject the necessary preconditions for rational deliberation in service of the capitalist order. However, I find it odd that Weissman is so willing to explore the conditions that created the work of Allan Sekula, while having such reticence in determining what conditions produced the audience of Glenn Beck. What Weissman fails to address effectively is that both parties are striving for freedom. However, this freedom is a perverted and tarnished version of what Immanuel Kant reflected on in his Critique of Judgment. The freedom Terri Weissman speaks seems to have more in common with the freedom Daniel Bell was primarily concerned with in his Coming of Post-Industrial Society. This freedom is not at all what the architects of the Enlightenment would have intended when discussing such a topic. For them, freedom was a means to move beyond sense and nature by way of reason. It was not a means to justify antinomian impulses in the name of self-expression, yet this is what the term has largely come to signify. Therefore, when societal and cultural gestures regarding freedom make their way into the public sphere, the outcome is often a confounding paradox.

## THE FREEDOM ART CAN GIVE YOU AND THE CRITICALITY IT CREATES

The decision-making process that is art, creates an internal order. In this sense, culture mirrors society in that there needs to be a healthy balance between order and disorder. Individuals and regimes that seek an ultimate and totalitarian order are almost always destined to fail. It is for this reason that the artists occupy a precarious position in society. They seek to bring order to the chaos and to seek out the boundaries of artistic disciplines. Fundamentally art is about making decisions in regard to how something is presented and contextualized. I would say my art is about how these decisions end up being instrumentalized by the societies that accommodate them. I say this because art has a tendency to aid in the promotion of not just cultural but social values. Art and artists are often used as self-evident proof of the creativity and freedom that society has bequeathed to its participants. The irony is that art and artists have existed under some of the most atrocious and deplorable conditions and have still managed to make art. Individuals in concentration camps, prisons, and psychiatric hospitals have all produced art. To attribute the creative contributions of these individuals to their environment would seem disingenuous at best. How then did contemporary art become a bargaining token for the dominant mode of social relations? It seems as if art and artists might actually represent a faction of society that is difficult to control. This goes back to the idea of order and disorder and how this relates to totalitarian societies. To valorize the work of artists may be another way of saying that these individuals are under control.

Clearly, I am not anti-art or against art. I truly feel that art has the power to alter the way individuals perceive and in turn, live. There is great power here through the means of

aesthetic discourse and self-reflexivity. Art has become what Boris Groys has termed the 'paradoxical object' in that it is both an image and a critique of the image. He does not use this term disparagingly. In fact, he sees the paradox object as one of the fundamental ways the balance of power is sustained. To Groys, modern and contemporary art, as pluralistic as they both are, serve these ends (Groys, 2008 p. 9). In my own work, I seek out paradoxical notions and gestures of daily life and illuminate them with works of art.

Contemporary art is full of paradoxes. This used to vex me, but I have now come to terms with the fact that it is part of its very nature. In fact, if there is anything I have learned from Kant, Hegel, Habermas, and Groys, it is that this might be the purpose art serves. If what subtends art is a means and method to becoming a more enlightened civilized subject, it would naturally follow that one would have to become well acquainted with paradoxes. For it is in many instances that the strengths and powers of overarching structures, whether tectonic, social, or cultural, are derived by paradoxical means.

## CRACKS AND STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY



Figure 1.1: Control Joint 1; plaster, graphite, oil stick, dust. 2021

This piece was made by taking a press mold of the control joint in the sidewalk. The work was cast in plaster and surfaced with graphite and oil stick. The use of a conventional and vernacular form (the sidewalk) and specific artistic forms (plaster, graphite, and oil paint) points toward a fissure that exists between visual art and daily life. It was important to focus on my own

internal dialogue regarding fissures in the creation of this work. The control joint is an intentional fissure often added to the concrete while it is still malleable. This intentional fissure prevents unintended cracks and breaks in the overall structure.

Like many cracks and fissures, the ones in the sidewalk come from below. Rarely does a powerful force apply pressure from above and crack the reinforced concrete (with the obvious exception of controlled demolitions). Frequently, unsightly cracks in the concrete come from the roots of overgrown trees and natural disasters in the form of landslides and earthquakes. Within this, there is a beautiful life metaphor that beneath the surface of things lurks a tremendous force possessing the capability of making dramatic structural changes.

If one were to maintain the existing structure and dominant way of things, one would have to question how many challenges to the structure might be permissible and where and when individuals would be allowed to do such a thing. In the case of the control joint, the concrete is most likely to crack along the predetermined line. The joint actually creates a specific place for the concrete to crack and prevents it from happening elsewhere and doing harm to the overall slab. If done correctly, the control joint contextualizes cracks making them less visible and more benign.

The very thing performed was the feared outcome of an unfortunate mishap. To put it crudely, it was a dress rehearsal for a potential disaster. Therefore, it is not a true disaster, but a staged one in which the stakes are low. In the end, you will always have a crack or fissure, but at least this will be a sightly one. I found this to be an amazing model system for what contemporary visual art has become. Creating intentional cracks in order to prevent them from occurring in the future is, in a sense, a paradox.

## CONCLUSION: ON THE MANAGEMENT OF CONTRADICTIONS

Art, at least a large part of it, deals with the management of contradictions. Earlier on in the thesis, I discussed how many aristocratic think tanks are engaged in similar behavior. In a curious way, both seem to maintain the balance of power and perpetuate the status quo. One does so by redistributing the resources it extracts from the people it serves, while the other seeks to act as both an image and critique of the image simultaneously. Both are engaged in cyclical forms of logic, and as these wheels turn, the dominant order moves forward. I hate to reiterate my initial stance, but it is art's ability to make the world appear more creative and free than it actually is that vexes me. The hegemonic powers of Western democracy seem to love art. I truly believe that it has to do with art's ability to successfully present itself as a paradoxical object.

What art has to give to the world is far greater than anything that could ever be known by means of pure nature or pure reason. Art is the place where these two concepts coalesce around a paradoxical endgame that many have termed art. Mawkish yes, but I honestly believe this, and I say it without the slightest hint of irony. However, what art and culture can bequeath to society can not be debased to a simplistic message or a moral aptitude. The visual arts must recuperate itself by being at a remove from the transactional nature of everyday life. If base-level transactions are to be found under the pretense of art, this is only because recent developments in the sectors of art and culture have made it so. Art, and in particular visual art, must seek its own autonomy and stop leveling the same criticisms society has directed at itself under the pretense of art. Nothing could be more destructive to the nature of art and the realization of its full potential than a contingency on criticisms and societal differences that exist outside the sphere of



art and culture. If art is to have a true impact on the world and the way people live it must stop its total dependence on the vernacular of daily forms of existence and critically examine what it means to present something as art. To uncover art's inherent political valences, one must perpetually uncover and interrogate its inherent structure.

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