

# AIR GUITAR

DAVE HICKEY

Essays on Art & Democracy

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## FRIVOLITY AND UNCTION

The darker side of channel surfing: I was ensconced in a motel in the heartland on a Sunday evening. Abandoned by my keepers at the local university, I was propped up on the bed, eating a burrito and swooping through the channels when I realized that I had just flipped past a rather bizarre primetime option. Reversing my board into the curl, I flipped back a couple of channels, and, by jiminy, there it was: the auction room at Sotheby's, in the teaser for *60 Minutes*. I was teased, naturally, so I "stayed tuned" for what turned out to be a televised essay on the fatuity and pretentiousness of the art world. Morley Safer played Gulliver in this essay. Various art personalities appeared in the role of Houyhnhnms. I just sat there frozen, like a deer in the headlights. Then I caught the drift, relaxed, and tried to get into it. No one was being savaged about whom I cared that much. Nothing very shocking was being revealed. It was just the same old fatuous, pretentious art world, and nothing confirms me more strongly in my choice of professions than a good healthy dose of sturdy, know-nothing, middle-American outrage at the caprices of this world.

Over the years, I have become something of a connoisseur of mid-cult portrayals of the art world. Among my favorites are the six or seven "art episodes" of *Perry Mason*, with their egregious fakes and heartless frauds, their felonious art dealers, patronizing critics, vain artists, and gullible collectors. I also keep a warm place in my heart for Waldo Lydecker, the psychopathic art critic and connoisseur played by Clifton Webb in *Laura*. For a kid like me, stranded out in the big bland, beguiled by glamour and hungry for some stylish action, the image of the effete Waldo in his posh Manhattan digs, reclining in his perfumed bath, shattering someone's reputation with a whisk of his poison pen, was a deftly alluring one—and remains so, in fact.

No more alluring, however, than the rough, improvisational

world that I inferred from Luce Publications' sneering coverage of Jackson Pollock's unruly triumph and Andy Warhol's apocalyptic opening at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia—where they took down the paintings to make room for the party. For myself, and for many of my friends, these news magazine stories provided our first fleeting glimpse of something other—of something braver and stranger. We recognized the smirky, condescending tone of these stories, but kids are expert in decoding this tone, which invariably means: This may look like fun, but don't do it. But it still looked like fun, and thus, far from retarding the progress of peculiar art and eccentric behavior, poor Hank Luce inadvertently propagated it, seeding the heartland with rugged little paint-splashers and frail, alien children with silver hair.

The world portrayed in Morley Safer's essay on *60 Minutes* did not look like fun. No matter how artfully decoded, the piece was not going to lure any children out of the roller-rink in Las Cruces. It was obsessed with money, virtue, and class-hatred—issues ill-designed to put your thumb out in the wind. Safer's piece did, however, fulfill the conditions of satire: It was unrepresentative, ungenerous, and ruthlessly unfair—but it was not wrong. It was wrong-headed, ignorant, and ill-informed about art, as well, but if these afflictions disqualified folks from commentary, more than half of the art community itself would be stricken mute. So I was cool with Safer's jibes. It's a free country and all like that, and who the hell watches *60 Minutes*, anyway, unless they're stranded in a motel out by the highway in the middle of America?

Also, Safer's piece did present some possibilities. It was not going to lure any loonies out of the woodwork, but what a *delicious* straight man Safer was!—what an exquisite target for dazzling *repartie*, for manifestations of *élan*, demonstrations of *panache*, and other French attitudinal stratagems that might constitute a lively and confident response to Morley's mid-cult unction. "Morley who?" "Sixty what?" "You watch tv on Sunday night?" "Don't

you have any *friends*!?" Even rudimentary dish like this would have been welcome, but it never materialized. In fact, a great many of my colleagues just lost it. What seemed routinely unfair to me was construed by them as cruelly *unjust*!—and this "injustice" was quickly transformed into "oppression," conjuring up, once again, the fascist heel, stomping down upon the frail ladybug of "the art community."

In the following weeks, people who should have known better filled the air with self-righteous bleats of indignation and defense—no easy task since one could hardly attack Safer without seeming to defend the perspicacity of West Side collectors, the altruism of Sotheby's auctions, and the *gravitas* of Christopher Wool. Even so, the art world just capitulated. Far from exhibiting magisterial disdain, the director of a major American museum even appeared with Safer on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Challenged by Safer with the undeniable fact that contemporary art lacks "emotive content," this director of a major museum insisted, in effect, that "It does *too* have emotive content!" confessing that he, personally, had burst into tears upon entering Jenny Holzer's installation at the Venice Biennale. *Well, didn't we all*, I thought (there being tears and tears), and at that moment, had there been an available window or website at which I could have resigned from the art world, I should certainly have done so.

I couldn't believe it. Within the year, I had seen similar and even more acerbic pieces on the music business and the film industry in primetime, and the members of *these* communities had somehow managed to maintain their composure—had kept their wits about them and simply refused to credit the Church Lady standards to which they were being held accountable. None of my colleagues (excepting the redoubtable Schjeldahl) quite rose to this challenge, and it occurred to me that their pedantic squeal was not dissimilar to the aggrieved hysteria with which the French Academy responded to the father of my profession, La Font de Saint-Yenne, when he published the first *Salon* in 1737—a tract

that is no less entertaining, ignorant, and ill-informed than Safer's. So I found myself wondering why the music and film communities could respond to bourgeois punditry with such equanimity, while the French Academy and the contemporary art world went certifiably ga-ga. I came up with one answer. Music and movie people are not in denial about the frivolity of their endeavor, while the contemporary art world, like the French Academy, feels called upon to maintain the aura of spectacular unction that signifies public virtue, in hopes of maintaining its public patronage. It was like a *Brady Bunch* episode: "Accused of frivolous behavior and fearful of losing their allowance, the Brady kids take Holy Orders and appear on *Charlie Rose*. 30 min. Color."

So here's my suggestion: At this moment, with public patronage receding like the spring tide anyway and democracy supposedly proliferating throughout the art world, why don't all of us art-types summon up the moral courage to admit that what we do has no intrinsic value or virtue—that it has its moments and it has its functions, but otherwise, all things considered, in its ordinary state, unredeemed by courage and talent, it is a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do. We could do this, you know. And those moments and those functions would not be diminished in the least. Because the presumption of art's essential "goodness" is nothing more than a *political fiction* that we employ to solicit taxpayers' money for public art education, and for the public housing of works of art that we love so well their existence is inseparable from the texture of the world in which we live.

These are worthy and indispensable projects. No society with half a heart would even think to ignore them. But the presumption of art's essential "goodness" is a conventional trope. It describes nothing. Art education is *not* redeeming for the vast majority of students, nor is art practice redeeming for the vast majority of artists. The "good" works of art that reside in our museums reside there not because they are "good," but because we love them. The political fiction of art's virtue means only this: The practice and

exhibition of art has had beneficial public consequences in the past. It might in the future. So funding them is worth the bet. That's the argument; art is good, sort of, in a vague, general way. Seducing oneself into *believing* in art's intrinsic "goodness," however, is simply bad religion, no matter what the rewards. It is bad *cult* religion when professing one's belief in art's "goodness" becomes a condition of membership in the art community.

So consider for a moment the enormous benefits that would accrue to us all, if art were considered bad, silly, and frivolous. Imagine the *lightness* we would feel if this burden of hypocrisy were lifted from our shoulders—the sheer *joy* of it. We could stop insisting that art is a "good thing" in and of itself, stop pretending that it is a "good thing" to do—to do "good"—and stop recruiting the good, serious, well-educated children of the mercantile and professional classes to do it, on the grounds that they are too Protestant, too well-behaved, too respectful, and too desirous of our respect to effect any kind of delightful change. We could abandon our pose of thoughtful satiety, reconceive ourselves as the needy, disconsolate, and desiring creatures that we are, and dispense with this pervasive, pernicious, Martha Stewart canon of puritan taste with its disdain for "objects of virtue" and its cold passion for virtue itself.

We could just say: "Okay! You're right! Art is bad, silly, and frivolous. So what? Rock-and-roll is bad, silly, and frivolous. Movies are bad, silly, and frivolous. Basketball is bad, silly, and frivolous. Next question?" Wouldn't that open up the options a little for something really super?—for an orchid in the dung heap that would seem all the more super for our surprise at finding it there? And what if art were considered bad *for* us?—more like cocaine that gives us pleasure while intensifying our desires, and less like penicillin that promises to cure us all, if we maintain proper dosage, give it time, and don't expect miracles? Might not this empower artists to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with good effects than

with dramatizing their good intentions?

What if works of art were considered to be what they actually are—frivolous objects or entities with no intrinsic value that only acquire value through a complex process of socialization during which some are empowered by an ongoing sequence of private, mercantile, journalistic, and institutional investments that are irrevocably extrinsic to them and to any intention they might embody? What if we admitted that, unlike seventeenth-century France, institutional and educational accreditation are presently insufficient to invest works of art with an aura of public import—that the only works of art that maintain themselves in public vogue are invariably invested with interest, enthusiasm, and volunteer commitment from a complex constituency that is extrinsic both to themselves and to their sponsoring institutions?

If we do this, we can stop regarding the art world as a “world” or a “community” or a “market” and begin thinking of it as a semi-public, semi-mercantile, semi-institutional agora—an intermediate institution of civil society, like that of professional sports, within which issues of private desire and public virtue are negotiated and occasionally resolved. Because the art world is no more about *art* than the sports world is about *sport*. The sports world conducts an ongoing referendum on the manner in which we should cooperate and compete. The art world conducts an ongoing referendum on how things should look and the way we should look at things—or it would, if art were regarded as sports are, as a wasteful, privileged endeavor through which very serious issues are sorted out.

Because art doesn't matter. What matters is how things look and the way we look at them in a democracy—just as it matters how we compete and cooperate—if we do so in the sporadic, bucolic manner of professional baseball, or in the corporate, bureaucratic manner of professional football, or in the fluid, improvisatory manner of professional basketball. Because, finally, the art world is no more a community than Congress is a community, although,

like Congress, it is in danger of *becoming* one and losing its status as a forum of contested values where we vote on the construction and constituency of the visible world. Works of art are candidates, aspiring to represent complex constituencies. So it is important that the value of art, *as art*, remains problematic—and equally important that none of us are disinterested in its consequences, or involved just for the “good” of art, which is not good. So consider these three benefits.

First, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, works of art could fail. They could do so by failing to achieve a complex constituency—or by failing to sustain a visible level of commitment and socialization—and this failure would be public and demonstrable, since everyone involved would be committed to their own visual agendas and none to the virtue of “art.” Such failure, then, would constitute an incentive to quit or to change—with the caveat that works of art with any constituency at all may sustain themselves in marginal esteem until, perhaps, their time has come. The practice of maintaining works of art in provisional esteem simply because they *are* works of art and art is good, however, robs artists of the primary benison of mercantile civilization: certifiable, undeniable, disastrous failure.

In warrior cultures there is no failure. There is only victory and death. In institutional cultures there is neither failure nor success, only the largesse or spite of one's superiors. Failure, however, is neither death nor the not-death of institutional life; it is simply the failure of one's peers (or the peer group to which one aspires) to exhibit any interest in or enthusiasm for one's endeavors. And there is no shame in this. In fact, such failures constitute the primary engine of social invention in Western societies, because these failures mean that you are wrong or that your friends are wrong. If you suspect that you are wrong, you change. If you think your friends are wrong, you change your friends, or, failing that, become a hobbyist. There is no shame in this, either.

Second, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to

do, art professionals, curators, museum directors, and other bureaucratic support-workers might cease parading among us like little tin saints—like Mother Teresa among the wretched of Calcutta—and our endeavors would be cleansed of the stink of their unctuous charity. Because if everyone's involvement in the frivolity of art were presumed to be to some extent self-interested, these caregivers would have to accept the obligation of taking care of *themselves* in pursuance of their own ends, and if these ends were just to hang around with artists and put on shows out of which nothing can sell, they could finance these purportedly public-spirited self-indulgences themselves.

This would abolish a fiction that is nowhere confirmed in my experience: that the art world is divided into “selfish commercial people” and “selfless *art* people”—the selfish commercial people being the artists, critics, dealers, and collectors who take the risks, produce the product, and draw no salary—the “selfless *art* people” being the disinterested, public-spirited, salaried support-workers, who take no risks, produce no product, and dare not even *buy* art with their art-derived salaries, lest they be guilty of “conflict of interest.” The truth is that *everyone* is interested and self-interested and should be. Everyone waters their own little flower (although some do so at less risk than others). Moreover, *everyone* is public-spirited: Everyone who waters their little flower tends the garden, as well, because no one is such a fool as to imagine their flower might flourish if the garden goes to seed.

Yet we continue to presume that honest virtue somehow inheres in those art functionaries who receive salaries, ideally from public sources, and that vice just naturally accrues to those who must live by their wits. Through the exquisite logic of Protestant economic determinism, virtue is ascribed to those who can afford to live nice, regular middle-class lives as a consequence of their submission to whatever authority dispenses their salary, and those who disdain such authority are, well, problematic. For the first time in history, in American art circles, the term “commercial

artist” does not designate a guy who draws Nikes for *Sports Illustrated*. It designates an artist without a trust fund who has been unable to secure a grant or a teaching job.

If everyone declared their own self-interest, however, brought their own little flowers out of the hothouse and took responsibility for acquiring the wherewithal to water them, artists, critics, and dealers, who get paid by the piece, could stop parenting their self-appointed parents by donating their production to be frittered away or auctioned off by the support systems that supposedly support *them*—which, in fact, only erodes the market for the work donated and almost certainly insures the need for continued charity. Having said this, we must remember that presumptuous demands for theatrical gratitude by self-appointed caregivers are not local to the art world; they are the plague of this republic. The police complain that citizens don't support them; museums and alternative spaces complain that artists don't support them; radicals complain that workers don't support them; feminists complain that women don't support them. Nobody will do anything for anybody anymore, it seems, without a big hug in return. Yet, if such voluntary care constituted genuine advocacy, these demands would not be made. Thus, when they are made, they may be taken as self-serving and ignored. Making and selling and talking about art is simply too much fun and too much work to be poisoned by that perpetual begging whine: “We're only trying to help!”

Finally, if art were considered a bad, silly, frivolous thing to do, I could practice art criticism by participating in the street-level negotiation of value. I might disregard the distinctions between high and low art and discuss objects and activities whose private desirability might be taken to have positive public consequences. As things stand, my function as a critic is purely secondary unless I am writing or talking about work in a commercial gallery. Otherwise, I am a vestigial spear-carrier in aid of normative agendas. In commercial galleries and artists' studios, the value of art

is problematic by definition; and in these spaces, dealers, collectors, critics, and any other committed citizen who is willing to risk something enter into an earnest colloquy about what this silly, frivolous stuff might be worth.

If I praise a work in a commercial space, I invest words in it and risk my reputation. In doing so, I put pressure on the price by hopefully swaying public opinion. If I praise an exhibition in an institutional space, however, I am only confirming public policy. And since no art is for sale, I am really doing nothing more than the institution itself: giving the artist “exposure” (which should be a felony) and reinforcing the idea of art as a low-cost, risk-free spectator sport when in fact it is a betting sport. Thus, my institutional bets are nothing more than fodder for grant applications and *résumés*—a fact that becomes clear when I choose to detest an institutional exhibition, since, in doing so, I am questioning the fiduciary responsibility of expending public funds on such an exhibition and undermining the possibility of future funds. This, I have discovered, is taken very seriously indeed, although it has *nothing* to do with investing art with social value and everything to do with art’s presumed, preordained virtue and the virtue of those who promote it.

So, I have been thinking, if art is “good” enough to be deserving of public patronage, just what does it do? I would suggest that since such work must be designed in compliance with extant legislation and regulatory protocols, it can only work on behalf of this legislation and those protocols. It can encourage us not just to obey the laws that we all fought so hard to pass, but to *believe* them, to internalize the regulatory norms of civil society into a “cultural belief system.” Unfortunately, art that aspires to this goal is nothing more or less than *tribal art*, a steady-state hedge against change and a guarantee of oppression in the name of consensus, however benign.

To cite an instance: a young art professional, in aid of this tribal agenda, actually had the gall the use Robert S. McNamara’s

Vietnam-era expression “winning their hearts and minds” in my presence. When I recovered from my flashback, I told her that, in my view, if you catch their eye, their hearts and minds will follow. She didn’t even get the reference, and I could tell that it seemed perfectly reasonable to her that artists would subordinate their endeavors to the norms of “right-thinking people.” This is good tribal thinking. In mercantile democracies, however, the practice of secular art, from Édouard Manet to Cindy Sherman, has invariably been the product of “wrong-thinking” made right. Because such works represent more than what they portray. They represent us in the realm of the visible, and if they represent enough of us, and if we care enough, yesterday’s “wrong-thinking” can begin to look all right. It’s a dangerous game, but it’s the only one in town.



So, I’ll tell you what I would like. I would like some bad-acting and wrong-thinking. I would like to see some art that is courageously silly and frivolous, that cannot be construed as anything else. I would like a bunch of twenty-three-year-old troublemakers to become so enthusiastic, so noisy, and so involved in some stupid, seductive, destructive brand of visual culture that I would feel called upon to rise up in righteous indignation, spewing vitriol, to bemoan the arrogance and self-indulgence of the younger generation and all of its artifacts. Then I would be really working, really doing my thing, and it would be so *great!* And it is *going* to happen, is already beginning to happen. The question is whether or not we will recognize it when it catches our eye.